

INTERPRETATIONS OF BULLYING:
HOW STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND PRINCIPALS PERCEIVE
NEGATIVE PEER INTERACTIONS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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INTERPRETATIONS OF BULLYING:
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Despite increased media attention following high-profile school shootings, bullying continues to be defined as a nationwide problem. While researchers in a number of fields have studied this problem, much of the existing literature ignores information about how individuals in schools actually define and interpret bullying. In order to better understand these interactions, my dissertation is a multi-method study combining interviews with 53 students and 10 adults and over 430 hours of participant observation with fifth grade students at two rural elementary schools. Drawing on the sociological tradition of symbolic interactionism, these methods allow me to understand bullying from the perspectives of those in the schools.

I argue that bullying is socially constructed by students and adults who take social contexts into account when determining whether or not an action should be defined as bullying and how they will respond. While adults in this study focused on outcomes, students focused on intentions and included a number of caveats in their definitions, stating that those who were joking, retaliating, or making fun of younger students were not engaging in bullying. Further, the images associated with the word “bully” in popular culture led a number of participants to hold views of bullying that focused on people rather than actions, thinking of bullies as those who were always mean. These person-centered definitions allowed them to “define away” bullying as a problem in their

schools, despite the continued presence of interactions that fit typical definitions of bullying.

Because they could not directly observe all of the interactions taking place in a classroom, at lunch, or on the playground, bullying often went unobserved by adults. As a result, students were able to use the school rules as weapons against each other, selectively reporting rule violations by peers that they disliked, whether or not their peers were guilty of those violations. These findings demonstrate the ways that bullying is a part of the culture in these elementary schools. As such, solutions to this problem demand an understanding of and consideration for the larger school culture in order to improve students' daily experiences at school.

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Despite increased media attention following high-profile school shootings, bullying continues to be a nationwide problem for both boys and girls. Sullivan, Cleary, and Sullivan (2004:3, emphasis in original) define bullying as “a *negative* and often *aggressive or manipulative* act or series of acts by one or more people against another person or people usually over a period of time. It is *abusive* and is based on an *imbalance of power*.” These actions can take the form of verbal abuse, physical abuse (or attempted physical abuse), or indirect abuse through hand gestures, facial expressions, or systematically ignoring, excluding, or isolating an individual (Olweus 1993, Ambert 1995, Sullivan et al. 2004). The majority of bullying actions take place in and around schools, where children are brought together with their peers. Chapell et al. (2006) find that U.S. students who are bullied, bullies, or both during elementary school are more likely to maintain those roles through high school and into college, while Kumpulainen and Räsänen (2000) find that children who were involved in bullying at age eight, and particularly those who were bullies and victims, are more likely to have psychiatric

symptoms such as hyperactivity and acting negatively toward their external environment at age fifteen.

The importance of these findings is magnified when one considers the extent of bullying in the United States. Estimates on the number of U.S. elementary students affected by bullying range from 19 percent (Pellegrini, Bartini, and Brooks 1999) to 30 percent (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development 2001), though a complete picture of negative peer interactions for U.S. students has not been assembled. A national report on indicators of school crime and safety found that 24 percent of primary schools report daily or weekly student bullying (Dinkes, Cataldi, Kena, and Baum 2006). The same report breaks bullying down by type for middle and high schools, finding that 28 percent of students between 12 and 18 years old reported having been bullied at school during the past six months. Of these students, 19 percent said they had been made fun of, 15 percent said they were the subject of rumors, and 9 percent said that they were pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on. The general finding among researchers is that bullying increases throughout the elementary school years, reaches its peak near the middle and end of middle school, and decreases during the high school years.

Although these estimates reinforce the fact that understanding bullying is an important goal for researchers, surveys such as these largely ignore the contextual cues that students, teachers, and administrators use to interpret a wide range of potentially negative peer interactions that are a part of daily life at school. For example, Figure 1 contains one of the primary bullying questions from the 2007 School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey. Although the introduction to this question

Figure 1. A Bullying Question from the 2007 School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey.

19a. Now I have some questions about what students do at school that make you feel bad or are hurtful to you. We often refer to this as being bullied. You may include events you told me about already. During this school year, has any student bullied you? That is, has another student... <i>(Read each category a-g.)</i>			
		Yes	No
a. Made fun of you, called you names, or insulted you?	134	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>
b. Spread rumors about you?	135	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>
c. Threatened you with harm?	136	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>
d. Pushed you, shoved you, tripped you, or spit on you?	137	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>
e. Tried to make you do things you did not want to do, for example, give them money or other things?	138	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>
f. Excluded you from activities on purpose?	139	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>
g. Destroyed your property on purpose?	140	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>
Check Item 19a	Are all categories a-g marked "No" in Q19a above?	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes - SKIP to 20a 2 <input type="checkbox"/> No - SKIP to 19b

defines bullying as “what students do at school that make you feel bad or are hurtful to you,” the individual parts of the question (a-g) simply ask whether the student has experienced being threatened, pushed, etc. by another student. In doing so, the question leaves out contextual factors such as whether the person who pushed a given student was a friend and whether he or she felt bad as a result of this action. This also poses problems for validity. Consider two students, both of whom have been called names in a lighthearted way by their friends. In answering part a, the first student may respond that she has not been made fun of, called names, or insulted because the introduction to the question specified that in order to answer yes she would have had to feel bad as a result of the interaction. A second student, however, may ignore the introduction and answer in the affirmative because he has, in fact, been called names, even though he did not feel bad as a result. Because students may not respond consistently to this question, drawing conclusions from the resulting percentage of students who have been “bullied” is problematic.

The social contexts that students consider when responding to surveys about bullying are the same contexts that researchers need to take into account in order to fully understand the implications of their work. For example, some have argued that students with close friends are victimized less frequently than those without, which has been called the “friendship protection hypothesis” (Boulton et al. 1999, Mouttapa et al. 2004). These studies, however, tend to ignore potential intervening variables such as a lack of social skills that could simultaneously prevent friendships and encourage victimization. This situation is described by Newman (2004:229), who notes that an individual’s “perception of himself as extremely marginal in the social worlds that matter to him” is one of five necessary but not sufficient factors leading to what she calls rampage shootings. Additionally, the fact that nearly 70 percent of U.S. students believe their schools respond poorly to bullying (Newman 2004) underscores the importance of school reactions in preventing these perceptions. The issue of perception on the part of bullies as well as victims, bystanders, and school staff members is crucial to understanding the social contexts of negative peer interactions in elementary schools is necessary in order to suggest relevant interventions that, as noted above, may have long-term effects.

Clearly, bullying is a problem that affects students of all ages, but by aiming to understand how students, teachers, staff members, and principals perceive negative peer interactions in elementary schools, suggestions can be made for the introduction of techniques for their prevention and resolution with the intention of providing students with skills for conflict resolution that will benefit them when bullying reaches its peak in middle school. Studies suggest that successful programs to teach students skills for conflict resolution in elementary school might have lasting positive impacts on the

quality of those students' school experiences, preventing some of the long-term effects discussed above (Thompson, Grace, and Cohen 2001, Sullivan et al. 2004). With these broad goals in mind, this study examines: how students, teachers, staff members, and principals define what is and is not bullying; how teachers, staff members, and principals attempt to control and prevent negative behavior between students; how students exert control over their interactions in the presence of adults; why students make the choices they do in response to bullying and other peer misconduct; and what these findings suggest for school officials and other policy makers who want to improve the daily lives of students. This study also addresses a need for sociological perspectives on bullying (Yoneyama and Naito 2003).

EXPLORING NEGATIVE PEER INTERACTIONS

A number of studies on the peer cultures of children and youth have highlighted the more negative aspects of peer interactions, including bullying (e.g., Ambert 1995, Sullivan, Cleary, and Sullivan 2004) as well as teasing and insults (e.g., Fine 1987, Eder 1991, 1995), exclusion from higher status groups (e.g., Eder 1995, Adler and Alder 1998), and sexual harassment (e.g., Eder 1995, Renold 2002). It should be noted that while conflict is implicit in a number of these interactions, not all conflict is negative. A number of researchers suggest that peer disputes can serve positive functions, such as protecting space (Voss 1997) and strengthening friendships (Rizzo 1989), indicated by the finding that children will resume playing together shortly after a dispute takes place (Evaldsson 1993). Other researchers have found that conflicts aid in the development of peer cultures by children because they produce social organization, create political alignments, and thereby realize their practical interests within a changing set of social

relationships (Maynard 1985). Conflict may also aid in the reproduction of authority, friendship, and other social patterns that transcend single episodes of interaction (Maynard 1985, Rizzo 1989). While the function of conflict in these cases appears to have long-term positive effects, the proposed research differs from these studies in that I seek to understand short-term interpretations of conflict — such as how conflict between friends differs from conflict with others — that students use when they are not likely considering the big picture.

In addition to the functions noted above that researchers have denoted as positive, playful teasing may be used among children to create and maintain joking relationships and alliances in which they separate themselves from others such as adults (Evaldsson 1993). Indeed, the teasing that Corsaro (2003) received upon his entry into an Italian preschool can be seen as a sign of acceptance. In other instances, children can also use teasing as a form of social control to establish guidelines for what is and is not acceptable behavior. As Thorne (1993:54) argues, “teasing makes cross-gender interaction risky, increases social distance between girls and boys, and has the effect of marking and policing gender boundaries. The risk of being teased may dissuade kids from publicly choosing to be with someone of the other gender.” Additionally, Evaldsson (1993:169) notes that “Among peers, requiring the assistance of an adult is considered a form of cowardice which often results in extensive teasing and insults. It is not acceptable to promote one’s own positions with the help from an outside authority figure, instead the children should be supported by other children both in talking and fighting.” In cases such as these, the playful nature of teasing conceals implicit messages about accepted behaviors and with whom one can associate.

Contributing to the veiled nature of these messages is the likely response to teasing. Eder (1995:168) notes that teasing routines invited a range of playful responses but responses to ritual insult routines consisted of additional ritual insults. While it may appear to outsiders that playful teasing is less harmful than harsher insults, neither teasing nor ritual insulting is necessarily positive or negative. Just as teasing from friends may be received differently than teasing from other peers, insults can be directed at friends as well as others. Some boys in Eder's (1995:73) study, for example, used insults to compare their "insult skills" with others as well as to "enhance their status outside their own group." Because status is a limited commodity (Milner 2004), teasing or insulting lower or equal status group members may be a way to increase their own status in the eyes of others (Fine 1987, Adler and Adler 1998). Evans and Eder (1993), for example, found that middle school girls who were isolated from their peers were assumed to have other negative characteristics as well and were more likely to be labeled sexually deviant, leading to further rejection and ridicule.

Fine (1987:118) highlights the effects of status hierarchies on insults, finding that "insults can be directed down or across the status hierarchy, but it is rarer for them to be directed upward—at least if the target is present. Low-status boys who criticize someone of higher status may find themselves the target of a volley of insults." Despite the more serious appearance of insults, some research has shown that both interpreting insults as playful and responding with playfully elaborate or clever insults are necessary for participation in particular male subcultures, such as the boys who are interested in comparing their insult skills above, while those who lack these skills are more likely to become targets (Corsaro and Eder 1990:212). Similarly, Goodwin (2006:96) finds that

girls use ritual insulting to “transform a potentially dangerous contest or conflict into a bout of wit.” Through successful participation in these insult routines individuals are able to develop a sense of solidarity (Everhardt 1983) while establishing and reinforcing status hierarchies (Labov 1972, Goodwin 1982).

While the interactions above could be seen as forming a continuum from “less serious” playful teasing to insults and “more serious” bullying, it is important to note that in actual interactions, there are no clear delineations. Rather, the meaning of a given statement often depends on one’s interpretation, which can differ widely from child to child as well as across groups. Generally, as peer conflict becomes more serious, it becomes less common in interactions with close friends, although Adler and Alder (1998) detail exceptions to this trend. Just as some male subcultures use insults as a regular mode of interaction, one’s interpretations of disputes and teasing can differ based on the topic or one’s social skills, social class, ethnicity, or nationality. For instance, Corsaro (1994) found that some Italian and African American preschool children use debates and teasing to develop friendships while some middle-class White American preschoolers are highly sensitive to these forms of interaction. In their friendly interactions it is likely that children must work at “negotiating the border,” in which they carefully monitor the reactions of others to create shared definitions what is and is not appropriate in a given situation (Oswald 1992).

PEER SUPPORT

In addition to direct participation in interactions such as teasing, insulting, and bullying, children take on a number of roles that affect those who are involved in these interactions. To an individual who has been insulted or bullied, friends may fill the most

important of these roles by showing acceptance that can serve to lessen the pain and protect one from group pressures (Thompson et al. 2001, Singer and Doornenbal 2006). Eder (1991) notes that peer groups also function as arenas in which children and adolescents can learn the skills for appropriate responses to teasing and insults. Those who have not learned these skills may be more likely to be ignored, marginalized, or excluded (Jenks 1996).

While friends can prepare individuals to deal with ambiguous and negative interactions and provide support afterward, the reactions of those who are present when these interactions are taking place are critical to their continuation. Sullivan et al. (2004:15) argue that bystanders are a part of the “bullying triangle” along with bullies and victims, and others have found that an average of four peers viewed schoolyard bullying episodes (O’Connell, Pepler, and Craig 1999). While some of these bystanders take on roles as sidekicks or reinforcers who actively support the bullying behavior through assistance, laughter, or other feedback, many adopt outsider roles and passively observe the behavior, while a small group of defenders actively attempt to help the victim (Sullivan et al. 2004). Thus, while peers are essential for providing social skills and support, they may also stand silently as their schoolmates are teased, insulted, or bullied by others (O’Connell et al. 1999, Sullivan et al. 2004). Although researchers such as these have studied the various roles that bystanders take on, it is not clear what motivates these children to take on a given role over another. Beyond dividing children into groups of “sidekicks” or “defenders,” I examine the motivations behind taking on a given role in a particular situation.

INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

While bullying in school would not be possible without children to fill the roles of bullies, victims, and bystanders, the organization of the schools in which many of these interactions take place also plays a large role in their creation and maintenance. For students who are typically at the peak of bullying in middle school, a major force in the creation of the power and status differentials that often lead to bullying are extracurricular activities (Eder and Parker 1987, Eckert 1989, Eder 1995.) These activities have been found to reinforce stereotypical gender norms through the high visibility afforded to male athletes and female cheerleaders (Eder and Parker 1987, Eder 1995). Additionally, stereotypical norms of masculinity for male adolescents have also been connected to the reinforcement of heterosexism and homophobia among students (Smith 1998, Klein and Chancer 2000). It is unknown whether physical strength plays a similar protective role from bullying for females (Olweus 1993), although it is possible that markers of female status such as appearance have more influence in school corporations, especially those where cheerleading is a high-profile activity (Eder 1995).

In addition to the limited availability of extracurricular activities and the increased status anxiety that they often cause students, Sullivan et al. (2004) argue that teachers at all levels can play an important role in the production of institutional factors that lead to bullying and other forms of harm. One way in which teachers can do this is through authoritarianism. By using domineering behavior to control students, Sullivan et al. argue that teachers demonstrate the type of power wielded by bullies. A second way that teachers can aid in the production of bullying is by taking on a narcissistic persona in which they aim to be adored by some students at the expense of others. The third model

that Sullivan et al. present is the active bully, a teacher who bullies students through ridicule. A fourth way that teachers may contribute to the atmosphere of bullying is by being disinterested, dismissing student complaints without action. Finally, Sullivan et al. discuss permissive teachers who present lofty ideals of student behavior yet do nothing to remedy the situation when they are not met. By enacting one of these roles, teachers become similar to a child's peers and play comparable roles in the production and maintenance of negative peer interactions.

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

Zero-Tolerance Approaches

The prevention and resolution of negative peer interactions such as bullying can be roughly divided into zero-tolerance and school culture approaches. Zero-tolerance approaches have seen widespread implementation and can be defined as disciplinary policies that are "intended primarily as a method of sending a message that certain behaviors will not be tolerated, by punishing all offenses severely, no matter how minor" (Skiba and Peterson 1999). One of the principal benefits of these approaches is that they can be perceived as providing immediate, though short-term, relief for problems between peers. In practice, however, the use of such one-size-fits-all approaches can lead to inconsistencies in application as well as harsh punishments in cases that most would see as harmless. In one example, a fifth grade student was suspended for wearing a five-inch plastic axe as part of a firefighter's costume to a class Halloween party, in another a high school senior was suspended for five days after a kitchen knife was found in the backseat of her car (Skiba and Knesting 2001).

Seemingly irrational responses such as these may be acceptable if evidence shows that zero-tolerance policies also have the intended effects of reducing and preventing school violence. Unfortunately, this does not appear to be the case. As Skiba and Knesting (2001:35) note, “despite more than ten years of implementation in school districts around the country, there is no convincing documentation that zero tolerance has in any way contributed to school safety or improved student behavior.” This may be because policies such as these fail to address the above institutional structures and processes related to status differentials that contribute to negative peer interactions (Gagnon and Leone 2001). School culture approaches, on the other hand, take a more holistic approach.

School Culture Approaches

In contrast to zero-tolerance approaches, school culture approaches consist of a number of methods that take “a systematic approach to training, monitoring, and reinforcing appropriate behavior” (Gagnon and Leone 2001). Rather than harshly punishing all students regardless of their level of offense, school culture approaches focus on creating positive school and classroom climates in order to create a sense of community among students. Researchers who have taken approaches such as these have suggested engaging students in a variety of ways. Sullivan et al. (2004) argue that by supporting diversity and creating a culture of intellectual activity, cooperation, and respect, students will feel safe to be active participants in the learning process. Eder (1995) discusses the creation of an after-school group designed to encourage the discussion of bullying and insults, including opportunities to practice intervention skills such as the use of humor. Similarly, Gagnon and Leone (2001:105) discuss programs in

which “students are taught conflict resolution through modeling, role playing, interviewing, and small group work.” Programs such as these can take the form of school-wide interventions or specialized interventions for at-risk students and those who do not respond well to school-wide programs (Gagnon and Leone 2001), and may be especially important for social isolates and other students who have not developed these skills through interactions with peer groups (Eder 1991). Recognizing the potential impact of teachers, Thompson et al. (2001:228) note that the use of “cooperative and collaborative” teaching methods that bring together popular and unpopular children and showcase the talents of each can improve the lives of unpopular children.

Coinciding with Sullivan et al.’s (2004) call for the creation of a culture of intellectuals, researchers advocating school culture approaches often suggest the need for school-wide reforms. Thompson et al. (2001:119) argue that “the most successful school-wide bully-prevention programs focus on bystanders, helping them take moral responsibility for intervening in attacks and exclusion.” In order to change the social climate of a school, Olweus (1993) suggests school, classroom, and individual level measures, including better supervision during recess and lunch, teacher groups, cooperative learning in classrooms, and serious discussions with bullies and victims, and the parents of the involved students. Likewise, Sullivan et al. (2004:93) present a “whole school approach” in which students, teachers, and administrators work together to develop interventions. There is evidence that programs such as these have been successful. In the two years following the implementation of changes suggested by Olweus (1993) in 42 schools in Bergen, Norway, bullying incidents were reduced by 50

percent or more, coupled with reductions in vandalism, fighting, and truancy, and an increase in student satisfaction with school.

While the reduction of bullying in schools that implement practices such as this is impressive, it also highlights the fact that bullying is not likely to be completely eradicated and schools must be prepared to deal with these transgressions when they occur. The fact that nearly 70 percent of U.S. students believe their schools respond poorly to bullying (Newman 2004) underscores the importance of school reactions. As a method of intervention, Sullivan et al. (2004:216) present what they call the “no blame approach” that is based on a prosocial response to bullying. By avoiding common reactions such as a desire for punishment and revenge, they argue that this approach “steps outside of the cycle of blame and thus de-escalates reaction, defensiveness, and denial. Instead of focusing on who did what to whom, and why, it focuses on the feelings of the victim and what the social group around the victim (including the bully) can do to make things better. It is inclusive and socially enabling” (p. 216). In many ways, a no blame approach can be seen as the antithesis of the zero-tolerance policies discussed above. While this type of approach does not feature the swift and harsh reaction of zero-tolerance policies, Sullivan et al. argue that it goes further to change the attitudes of those involved and prevent future occurrences.

LISTENING TO PARTICIPANTS

Over the past 30 years, a shift has taken place in the conceptions of sociologists studying children and youth. In this time, views that it is acceptable to define children in terms of what they will grow up to be (Alanen 1990) and to consider them only in relation to this conception of adults (Jenks 1982) have been replaced by an increasing call

for the conceptual autonomy of children by both sociologists (Thorne 1987, Qvortrup 1994, James, Jenks, and Prout 1998, Corsaro 2003) and anthropologists (Caputo 1995). Sociologists have followed the lead of the feminist movement to give voice to children as a silenced group similar to giving voice to females as a silenced group (Prout and James 1990). Thorne (1987:86) was among the first to call for the conceptual autonomy of children and youth, reviewing the challenges faced by those who argued for the conceptual autonomy of women and arguing that children's "full lives, experiences, and agency have been obscured by adult viewpoints." Following Thorne, Qvortrup (1994) noted that at the heart of conceptual autonomy is the idea that the group one is interested in studying is the group that one should focus on, placing children at the center of research on childhood experiences. Increased consideration for the conceptual autonomy of children has been accompanied by research focusing on children's agency and the importance of social context, in addition to theoretical developments (Corsaro and Fingerson 2003). In contrast, many of the existing studies of bullying rely on researcher-driven conceptions of what bullying is, consisting of quantitative measurements of the frequency of specific interactions or the categorization of students into distinct groups of bullies, victims, and bystanders. As a result, the literature is lacking in work that highlights student perspectives, as well as those of their teachers and principals, despite calls for the examination of student perspectives on school life in response to school violence (Stevick and Levinson 2003).

There are a number of other reasons why qualitative methodologies are favored for the study of young people, giving voice to this formerly silent group (Thorne 1987). Foremost among these is the context that ethnography provides in the form of what

Geertz (1973) describes as “thick description.” This is especially important for research with children and adolescents because it allows researchers to move beyond elite views of their silenced nature and get closer to the “truth” of their experiences (Alanen 1990, Prout and James 1990). Similarly, Eder and Fingerson (2002:181) argue that interviewing allows children to give voice to their own interpretations. Through the use of participant observation and semi-structured interviews, which are discussed in more depth in Chapter Two, I am able to gain insight into students’ views of conflict and draw distinctions between what they consider to be playful and serious behaviors. I am also able to examine interpretations of the same interaction from the perspectives of multiple students as well as some adults to illustrate the cues that each uses in making these distinctions. Further, by listening to students’ voices I am able to begin to disentangle the complex motivations of bystanders for determining whether or not to involve themselves in a particular interaction. Finally, qualitative research allows me to examine whether differing approaches to discipline affect the prevalence of bullying.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

In addition to methodologies that allow researchers to share participants’ perspectives, a key to the study of these perspectives is a theoretical framework that allows researchers to make sense of complex interactions. In examining various aspects of schooling, a large number of researchers have drawn on the sociological perspective of symbolic interactionism (Kinney, Rosier, and Harger 2003). Several aspects of symbolic interactionism are applicable to the study of bullying. For example, Mead’s (1934) concept of role taking posits that individuals are able to imagine how their behaviors are perceived from the perspective of others, allowing them to anticipate how others will

respond to an action and adjust their actions accordingly when a response is not what they had expected. Further, Blumer's (1969:2) three premises of symbolic interactionism (that "human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them," that "the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows," and that "these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters") are crucial to understanding how students define their behaviors in schools.

While symbolic interactionism shows how meanings are defined and shaped within social interaction, the interpretive approach grows out of this perspective and adds a structural component to examine the reflexive relationship between structure and agency (Giddens 1984, Corsaro 1985, Eder and Nenga 2003). This approach views individuals as active agents who are influenced by social structures but take an active role in counteracting or modifying these structures (Mehan 1992, Eder and Nenga 2003). The idea that children do not passively reproduce society is crucial to the interpretive perspective and has led to the development of a new sociology of childhood that emphasizes the ways that children negotiate, share, and create culture with adults and with each other (Corsaro 1992, James, Jenks, and Prout 1998, Corsaro 2005). Given the association between the term "socialization" and passive recipients of social knowledge (Alanen 1990) and the fact that some see it as forward-looking and abstracted from historical time (Thorne 1987, 1993), Corsaro (2005:18-9) suggests the concept of "interpretive reproduction" to capture the emerging view that children are creative participants "contributing to cultural production and change" while remaining constrained by existing social structures. Rather than a linear view of development,

interpretive reproduction places emphasis on children's participation in cultural routines, which provide security and shared understanding while providing a framework in which sociocultural knowledge can be produced, displayed, and interpreted, serving as anchors that allow social actors to remain comfortable while dealing with ambiguous, unexpected, or problematic aspects of social situations (Corsaro 1992).

Combining interpretive perspectives with the conceptual autonomy of childhood discussed earlier, ethnographic researchers have explored the ways that meaning mediates childhood behavior, which is at the heart of the current study's attempt to better understand bullying in schools. Examples include Hadley's (2003) study of a Taiwanese kindergarten classroom and Childress's (2004) examination of the appropriation of space by teenagers. Hadley (2003) finds that students use what she calls "word play" to demonstrate their agency as they resist and accommodate two of the Confucian values their teachers are trying to impart. The first of these values is that the children should be good students, which the teachers communicated to their students through academic activities, the structure of the class, and behavioral expectations. Hadley found that the students both resisted and accommodated this value through word play. In one example, a substitute teacher's name contains one syllable of the word "apple" and a student resists the values of being a good student by quietly calling the teacher "apple." A nearby student accommodates the value of being a good student by reporting this transgression to the teacher, effectively reminding her classmate of the rules, which students were encouraged to do. A third student both resists *and* accommodates the values of being a good student by responding to a request to ask questions by raising his hand, waiting for

the teacher to call on him, and then asking “Where do seeds come from?” (Hadley 2003:200).

On their own, these attempts to resist and accommodate one of the values that teachers were trying to teach the students is not surprising since anecdotal evidence likely provides one with a number of situations in which teacher’s lessons have been interrupted. The second value that Hadley examines, however, suggests that there are larger concerns involved. In addition to being good students, the teachers encouraged the children to be good peer group members, designing projects that required them to work together in addition to reminding them to include one another in play. The related word plays that Hadley observed highlighted the ideal of including all members of the group and being good peer group members. This included a game called “Pig Eight” in which students counted from Pig One to Pig Eight, pointing at students as they did so. The student who was chosen as Pig Eight would then start the game again, pointing to students and counting. In her research, Hadley (2003:204) “did not find any instances of kindergarten children using word play to resist the value of being a good peer.” Connecting these findings to the differential levels of power between adults and children, one can argue that the Taiwanese children in Hadley’s study used word play both to resist values related to adult authority and to support values related to peer cooperation and social support.

Related to the issue of resistance discussed in Hadley (2003), Childress (2004) reflects on examples from two participant observations to examine the appropriation of space by teenagers. Because they are prohibited from owning property by their status as minors, they are forced to use the spaces of others. Childress discusses how students at

one school were prohibited from cutting through a broken fence to leave school grounds at lunch because adults did not define it as an appropriate exit. The students, however, did not see any of the typical claims to territory that they considered to denoting ownership over the property. Another example highlights the appropriation of a parking lot for social gatherings, which the teenagers saw as preferable to public spaces such as parks because public officials had less jurisdiction to cause them to disperse. These adolescents, Childress argues, follow a territorial model of land use, in which claims to space are based on use or signs of use (such as graffiti), while adults adopt a tenure model of land use since we “think of space as owned rather than occupied” (Childress 2004:2000).

The importance of the interpretive perspective for understanding bullying in schools can be seen in the contrast between studies such as these that examine the various ways that meaning mediates behavior and psychological studies of bullying that attempt to identify traits of bullies or victims. These studies conclude that victims of bullying tend to be physically smaller, more sensitive, quieter, and more withdrawn than their peers (Hoover, Oliver, and Hazier 1992, Byrne 1993) while bullies are typically vicious, uncaring, and aggressive (Duncan 1999, Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, and Rimpela 2000). In contrast, the qualitative interpretive approach taken here allowed me to view these sorts of categorizations as a false dichotomy that students and adults use in their attempts to distinguish between bullies and non-bullies. In this false dichotomy, individuals focus on nouns (*bullies*) and argue that if somebody is to be labeled a bully, he or she must fit that label at all times. As a result, the terms bully and non-bully become mutually exclusive and individuals attempt to place others into one category or the other. This differs from

the view that I developed as a result of this project, in which the focus is placed on verbs (*bullying*) and labels are applied to specific actions on a case-by-case basis. In this view, actions are considered part of a continuum from bullying to non-bullying and a student may participate in bullying at one moment (e.g. pushing another student in the hallway, insulting someone) and non-bullying at another (e.g. doing well on a math test, joking with friends). Rather than placing students into categories based on their individual characteristics, the interpretive approach allowed me to understand the ways that students' conceptions of bullying as a false dichotomy mediated their definitions of their own behaviors and the behaviors of others. The importance of an interpretive approach to the study of bullying is seen in a number of examples such as this in the chapters that follow.

OUTLINE OF THE FOLLOWING CHAPTERS

In Chapter Two, I describe the selection of the two elementary schools in which I conducted my research and explain why I have chosen to work with fifth graders. I also describe the process of gaining entry and developing rapport with the students, leading to my participation in a wide variety of activities with students from each social group. This is followed by a discussion of my interviews with students, teachers, staff members, and principals and my methods of data analysis.

Chapter Three focuses on student definitions of bullying. I find that most students view intentions and actions together, stressing that a victim of bullying must not have done anything to instigate these actions. For this reason, retaliation and self-defense are not considered bullying. Some students also rationalize negative behaviors against younger students and siblings, arguing that “*everybody* picks on the little kids.” Joking is

also a rationalized behavior, and students argue that verbal and physical abuse is okay if the perpetrator is “just playing around.” This leads to students who use “just playing” as a cover for their negative interactions with others as well as those who see picking on others as a fun activity, differentiating between themselves and those who pick on others because they are angry. Finally, a number of students view bullying as a false dichotomy, distinguishing between those who are bullies and those who are not rather than focusing on individual actions.

The perspectives of teachers, staff members, and principals are the focus of Chapter Four. I find that differing discipline styles have an effect on student behavior as it was harder for adults to control student behavior when expectations were inconsistent throughout the day. Like students, adults included both physical and verbal actions in their definitions of bullying, though they did not view retaliation or joking as suitable excuses for these behaviors since adults were more likely to focus on the *consequences* of bullying rather than on the *intentions* of students. Although they did not agree with all of the caveats that students included in their definitions of bullying, some adults did share the typical student view of bullying as a false dichotomy, focusing on particular students rather than actions. While these adults noted that verbal attacks can be just as harmful as physical attacks, verbal attacks were harder for them to observe directly and were treated less seriously than physical behaviors.

In Chapter Five, I examine the ways that students exert control over their own surveillance by adults. Because of student attempts to hide behaviors and the large amount of physical space available on the playground, I find that supervisors rarely observe incidents between students themselves, relying instead on the reports of students

to determine what has happened. As a result, students hold a great deal of power in determining who gets in trouble and who does not. Students use a number of factors to determine whether they will tell in a given situation, including their interpretations of an interaction, their relationships with those involved, and their own previous behaviors. Indeed, some students describe a sort of golden rule of telling in which they do not tell on others for doing things they have done in the past. Some students also associated telling with young students, making tattletale a label to avoid. In these school environments students are also able to use telling as a weapon, reporting the behaviors of enemies but not friends and falsely accusing those they dislike. While these tactics do not always work, they increase the importance of a student's reputation, as teachers reported taking student reputations into account when determining their response to reported incident.

Finally, in Chapter Six I examine the implications of this study for previous and future work on bullying. Here I offer recommendations for dealing with the problem of bullying in schools, showing the importance of looking at bullying within the entire school context.

Chapter Two

GAINING AN INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE

It is clear from the previous chapter that while bullying has received a large amount of attention from researchers, there is a need for work that will increase our understanding of how people in schools actually define and respond to these interactions. Previous research suggests that the frequency of bullying interactions peaks in middle school (Dinkes et al. 2006) where a fragmented school culture with multiple subject instructors and contact with a wider range of students, combined with relatively few opportunities for increased visibility (Eder 1995), leads to more intense power struggles as students attempt to gain a favorable position (Milner 2004). There are fewer studies, however, of bullying in the upper elementary school years. In this study I examine bullying in the final year of elementary school using a combination of participant observation and interviews with fifth grade students, their teachers, school staff members, and principles.

In contrast to middle school, elementary school is a relatively stable environment in which to study bullying. In a typical middle school, for example, students from a

number of elementary schools come together for the first time, leading to struggles for social status that likely exacerbate bullying. Most of the fifth graders that I spent time with for this study, however, have attended school together since kindergarten.

Understanding the definitions and motivations of students in this setting, then, will provide useful insights into bullying at this age level while providing future researchers studying bullying among older students with a point of comparison.

TWO SCHOOLS

With this in mind, I entered two elementary schools near the middle of the 2007-2008 school year to explore how fifth grade students (10-11 years old), their recess supervisors, teachers, and principals interpret and deal with bullying. This study was originally designed as a comparative analysis to examine how bullying interactions vary between schools with (Hillside Elementary¹) and without (Greenfield Elementary) a peer mediation program for the resolution of conflicts between students. Before my observations began, I identified Greenfield and Hillside Elementary as possible research sites by calling and speaking with staff members (typically administrative assistants), who provided information about whether or not the schools had anti-bullying programs. After determining which schools had these programs I used an online database provided by the state's Department of Education to compare student demographics and test scores, finding that Hillside and Greenfield Elementary were the most similar in these regards.

Located in a rural Midwestern city of about 15,000 people, Hillside and Greenfield Elementary each provide education for about 240 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Students at both schools are largely white and from middle- or working-class families. At Hillside Elementary 98% of students are white and 30%

¹ The names of all locations and participants are pseudonyms.

receive free or reduced-price lunches, compared to 97% and 41% at Greenfield Elementary. During the 2007-08 school year there were 45 fifth grade students in two classrooms at Hillside and 37 fifth grade students in two classrooms at Greenfield. Entering Hillside Elementary, visitors walk past the office and into a hallway with pictures of the previous years' students on the wall. The school itself is laid out like an H, with two main hallways running parallel to each other and a shorter connecting hallway. The main office is at the front of the left hallway while the cafeteria is at the front of the right hallway, with the gymnasium between them.

The fifth grade classrooms at Hillside feel lived-in, with cabinets for coats along one wall, sturdy bookshelves at the back and tables with worn chairs. There is not much extra space and although their arrangement changes throughout the year, the desks are typically placed close together so that students have room to move around the classroom. At the rear of the school is the playground with basketball courts to the right and a large area with wood chips and an assortment of swing sets, jungle gyms, and slides. Past the basketball courts and wood chips is a hill that leads down to a baseball diamond on the left and a large grass-covered area on the right. The playground is lined on two sides by trees and by a field of tall grass and weeds in the back.

In contrast to Hillside's lived-in feel, Greenfield Elementary has been recently remodeled. Entering the school, the office is on the right with large glass windows facing the hallway. The school forms an O, with the gymnasium and cafeteria taking up much of the left side and classrooms primarily off of the hallway on the right side. Space at the front of the school is taken up by the office and space at the back is filled by the teachers' lounge. Because the school was recently remodeled, the fifth grade classrooms still feel

new. Each has a countertop and cabinets running along the inside wall. On the back wall, each student has a three foot tall cubby with hooks for coats and backpacks, with more cabinets above. The rooms themselves are slightly larger in terms of both width and length than those at Hillside and the smaller number of desks in each magnifies this fact.

Greenfield's playground is behind the school and the first thing one sees when exiting the rear of the school is a circular driveway and parking lot where some of the teachers park. Before the remodeling, this had been the main entrance to the school. Beyond the parking lot are basketball courts centered between two areas with wood chips and swings, slides, and jungle gyms. The area on the right extends the length of the playground, from the parking lot to the fence separating the school's property from the house next door, while the area on the left is smaller. Past the basketball courts and the area on the left there is a large field with a baseball diamond backstop. The right side of the playground is demarcated by a few trees and field of tall grass containing a faded metal jungle gym, suggesting that the boundaries of the playground have changed over the years. The left side of the playground is separated from the road by a large ditch.²

Because only two of the nine elementary schools in this district reported having anti-bullying programs, one of my early goals was to evaluate the effectiveness of these intervention strategies in order to determine whether policy makers should dedicate increased funding for their creation at other schools. When I arrived at Hillside Elementary, however, I discovered that the peer mediation counselor had been funded by

² In the case of inclement weather (including rain and temperatures below 32 degrees) one grade at Greenfield was required to spend recess in their classroom while the other two used the gymnasium. This was rotated evenly between grades. During inclement weather at Hillside, fifth graders had recess in the gymnasium on Mondays and Tuesdays, but had recess in their classrooms Wednesdays through Fridays because other grade levels had physical education during the fifth grade recess on those days.

a grant that had expired at the end of the previous school year and that, in her absence, the program had been largely ignored. I was still interested to see whether the peer mediation program at Hillside had lingering positive effects on student interactions and was surprised when student relations at Hillside struck me as worse than those at Greenfield. As discussed in Chapter Four, it appears that the differing approaches to discipline at the two schools had a greater impact on student behavior than any carryover from Hillside Elementary's lapsed peer mediation program.

In addition to the differences in the students' exposure to anti-bullying programs, there were a number of differences in the structure of student life at the two schools. Both began at 8 am and ended at 2:50 pm, but students at Greenfield Elementary had more recess time and a longer lunch. In addition to a 15-minute morning recess, Greenfield students had a half hour for lunch followed by a 30-minute recess. Hillside students, in comparison, had no morning recess and only 20 minutes for lunch, followed by a 25-minute recess. Instead of a second recess, fourth and fifth graders at Hillside had a one-hour Life Skills course each Monday morning that was taught by their principal, Mrs. Knight. They also had a 15-minute Study Hall before lunch, during which they could work on homework or, if their homework was done, read. Because the morning was divided by recess, the school day at Greenfield Elementary seemed to me to move faster than that at Hillside, but this additional free time also provided more opportunity for students to get into trouble. In fact, in her interview Mrs. Knight mentioned this as a benefit of Hillside fifth graders having less recess time than they had in past years.

Students at these schools also had different levels of exposure to those in other grades. At Greenfield Elementary, third, fourth, and fifth grade students ate lunch and

then had recess together. At Hillside Elementary, however, fifth graders ate lunch alone in the cafeteria. While students at Greenfield sat at different tables, often with different people, nearly every day, those at Hillside frequently sat at the same table with the same students. Mrs. Knight intended the fact that the older students at Hillside had less time at recess and an additional Study Hall to cut down on interpersonal problems and prepare them for middle school, but when I was at Greenfield, I noticed that I enjoyed the additional free time, so I can only imagine that the Hillside students would have enjoyed it as well.

GAINING ENTRY

Having chosen these schools, in November of 2007 I arranged meetings with the principal of each school in order to present my research goals and ask for permission to work in their schools. At Hillside Elementary, the principal had a last-minute meeting and I met with one of the fifth grade teachers, Mr. Erickson, in her place. Both Mr. Erickson and Mr. White, the principal of Greenfield Elementary, were receptive to my proposed research. I provided each with copies of the Human Subjects forms that I would be using and mailed copies to the superintendent, who approved the project a few days later. Before beginning my observations I sent a Study Information Sheet to the parent or guardian of each student detailing the procedures of my general observations in the classroom, at recess, and at lunch. Using passive consent, this sheet explained that parents who did not want their children to be included in my observational data should return the study information sheet to me. The parents of four students at Hillside Elementary and one student at Greenfield Elementary returned this sheet and these students were not included in my field notes or analyses.

Role Models

In a study such as this where the goal is to understand the everyday interactions of a group, the researcher's role is crucial in gaining acceptance and being seen as somebody that participants can act naturally around. With this in mind, I modeled my interactions on those of others who have worked with children and adolescents. In his research with preschoolers, for example, Corsaro (1985) adopted the role of atypical adult by doing things that adults in positions of authority did not do. This included entering children's spaces, such as the sandbox and sitting with the children on small chairs, reacting to children rather than leading interactions, and answering questions truthfully. This semiparticipatory role is similar to the role of a nonsanctioning adult playmate adopted by Van Ausdale in her study of how children learn race and racism in preschool (Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001:40) and the role of "quiet friend" adopted by Eder (1995) in her study of middle school. Also similar is the role of friend that Fine (1987:241-2) adopted in his study of Little League players, in which he attempted to provide the services that any friend might, including companionship, advice, social support, food, and small loans (up to 25 cents).

In my own observations I took on a role most similar to that of Thorne (1993), who conducted research with fourth and fifth graders and entered their interactions to varying degrees based on the situation. For example, in classrooms Thorne acted primarily as an observer, while in lunchrooms she joined in students' interactions by eating and conversing with them. In this way, she was both an outside observer and a participant, although she often took a secondary role and did not attempt to direct the course of the interactions she observed. Despite these similarities, there is one important

way that my role differed from Thorne's. In some instances, Thorne was asked by teachers to act as a teacher's aide would, helping students who were having trouble with schoolwork. She notes that in these rare cases she "shifted with ease into the stance of an overseeing adult" (Thorne 1993:19). In contrast, teachers never asked me to help students in the classroom during my observations.

Going Back to Fifth Grade

In mid-December of 2007, I entered Greenfield Elementary for my first day of fifth grade as a 27-year-old, introducing myself as a student at a nearby university who was interested in learning about how fifth graders get along. In early January of 2008 I did the same at Hillside Elementary. I spent the next five months attending fifth grade Tuesday through Friday from the beginning of school in the morning until the end of lunch recess. Most weeks I alternated schools and teachers, spending one day with each of the four fifth grade classes. During times when I was not involved in college classes I spent five days a week at the schools. Despite my height I was able to set myself apart from typical adults on my first day in each school. Students were used to seeing other adults in the schools, either as volunteers or as student teachers, but they were not used to these adults going with them to things like music, physical education, art, library, recess, and lunch. As I entered areas like the music room or library for the first time with a particular class, a number of students told the teachers or supervisors that I was the "new student" in their class.

In taking on the role of an atypical adult, I was also aided by an oversight on my first day at Greenfield Elementary. I was considered a visitor at both schools and signed in and out on a form in the main office. Visitors were also expected to wear nametags in

order to help teachers and others in the school identify them, but Mr. White overlooked this on my first day in the school and within a few days I had introduced myself to most of the teachers and other staff. On my first day at Hillside Elementary a few weeks later, the administrative assistant told me to take a nametag after signing in and I asked if I had to. The principal, Mrs. Knight, asked me if I had been wearing one at Greenfield and I replied that I hadn't. She said, to my relief, that Hillside would do whatever Greenfield had been doing (Fieldnote, 1/8/08). It is likely that a highly visible nametag may have prevented some of the students from differentiating me from other adult visitors to the schools.

Following Thorne (1993), I spent most of my time in the classroom sitting in the back of the room, while I was more involved during special classes like music, physical education, and art, and at lunch and recess. Unlike Thorne, I did not move around the classroom observing students. Although my seating area was different in each classroom (in the various classrooms I sat in a student desk, a gliding rocker, at a large table, and next to a bookshelf), I believe that by remaining seated I appeared to be more in line with their expectations for a student. Further, the teachers in each classroom periodically rearranged the students' desks, sometimes placing them in groups of four or six, sometimes placing them in rows, and sometimes placing them in half circles. Mrs. Lane at Greenfield Elementary rearranged the desks nearly every week but the other teachers did so only about once a month. Because the location of my seat stayed the same but the locations of the students' seats changed throughout my observations, I was able to sit near a majority of the students and closely observe their classroom interactions. My classroom observations were likely also aided by the fact that three of the four teachers

whose classes I observed had been in their positions for a number of years, possibly making them more comfortable with having others in their classrooms.

While I initially stayed on the sidelines during recess when students asked if I wanted to play games like basketball, I quickly found out that I couldn't hear what they were saying to each other due to the noise level in the gym or on the playground, so I started joining in. During recess at the schools I twirled jump ropes, played games such as basketball, four square, football, and tag, used the swings and the slides, and just walked around with students. I was typically quiet and refrained from initiating conversations, though I participated when others asked me questions and I laughed at things that were funny.

Although a number of researchers report intervening when physical harm seems possible (Corsaro 1985, Eder 1995, Adler and Adler 1998), I was forbidden from doing so at both schools because of the school district's concern for potential lawsuits. While I was not told to report on smaller violations, in highly serious cases I was instructed to get the attention of an adult who could deal with the situation. While I witnessed a number of punches, kicks, shoves, and insults, I never witnessed a fight that needed to be broken up, allowing me to generally avoid being seen as an authority figure. It is important to note that even a single punch or insult carries the potential for physical or emotional harm but most of the behaviors such as these that I observed up close were of a playful nature. As such, I did not typically feel that my nonaction would be construed as a passive acceptance of negative behavior (Eder 1995).

Gaining Acceptance

Through enacting my role in these ways I received a number of signs that the students accepted me. For example, students frequently urged teachers to include me in in-class games and activities. I was also asked to protect objects, such as a Trivial Pursuit game that one student told me to “guard with your life.” When another student was eventually able to take the game from me, the owner proclaimed that he was “very disappointed” in me when he returned to the classroom (Fieldnote, 2/7/08). There were also other signs that students did not view me as an authority figure. When students took things from their friends at lunch, such as juice boxes or potato chips, the victims would frequently raise their hands as if they were going to tell on the perpetrator, causing the return of the items. This occurred a number of times when I was sitting next to students who used the threat of telling an authority figure to ensure the return of their items. By calling on someone else to serve as an authority figure, students indicated that they did not view me in this role. I also observed students swearing, pushing each other, and doing things such as reading a book when they were supposed to be working on an assignment that they knew the teachers could not see but that other students, and I, could.

Finally, students teased me. The day after I inadvertently cheated on a math assignment by copying off of another student (I was paired with a student that I thought was my partner but was actually my competition) a student jokingly accused me of stealing money for my lunch fee, then accused me of lying, cheating, and stealing. I said that I didn’t lie and she said that my statement that I didn’t lie *was* a lie. I knew that she didn’t really think I stole things because she had asked me to guard her drink that morning in class. A week later she asked again if I had stolen my lunch money and she

occasionally reminded others that I had cheated on a math assignment (Fieldnotes, 3/12/08, 3/13/08, 3/20/08).

Over the course of my five months in each school I was careful to observe as many different activities and students as I could. In order to exert control over where I sat and, thus, whom I sat by in the cafeteria, I stood in line and purchased a school lunch, as did the majority of students at both schools. This allowed me to sit by different students each day and to look specifically for students that I had not sat by nearly as much as others. During morning recess, I typically followed a group of students from the class I was observing to a particular activity. For lunch recess, I typically participated in activities with some of the students I had been sitting near. This allowed me to observe nearly all of the activities that fifth graders regularly participated in. The only exceptions were a few girls at each school who tended to walk around the playground with each other at recess. Unless I had been invited, my following these groups would not have been natural and would likely have disrupted their normal interactions. I did have chances to observe interactions between these girls during indoor recesses, however. As a result, I spent at least some time with all of the students in each class and I got to know most of them well, which proved to be helpful during the interview phase of my study.

TALKING ABOUT HOW STUDENTS GET ALONG

Participant observation allowed me to develop rapport with students while observing communicative norms and patterns and developing a general understanding of each school culture (Eder and Fingerson 2002). I also used these observations to ground the questions for the semi-structured interviews with students that began in late February of 2008. In these interviews I asked students about a broad range of interactions and

interpretations that would have been difficult to glean from the students' daily conversations, such as whether anybody had ever gotten mad at them even though they meant something as a joke, whether they picked on their family members for fun, and how they defined bullying.³ For the interview phase of my study, I provided fifth grade students and their parents with Informed Consent forms and interviewed all students for whom I received signed copies of both forms.

I interviewed students who had returned their consent forms primarily in alphabetical order, depending on student availability and when he or she turned in the forms. A number of students seemed interested in being interviewed and asked if they were next when I returned to the classroom after completing an interview. Students also sometimes asked me, as well as students I had already interviewed, what kinds of questions I asked. In some cases, I gave students new forms a number of times before they returned them with a parent or guardian's signature. Jackie, in Mrs. Lane's class at Greenfield, for example, told me one day that she had placed the form on her parents' bed for her mom to sign it but that her dad had used it to start a fire in their wood stove instead (Fieldnote, 2/29/08). Jackie eventually did return the form, and I believe that examples like these demonstrate that students were interested in discussing how fifth graders get along at their school. In all, I interviewed 24 of the 37 students at Greenfield Elementary and 29 of the 45 students at Hillside Elementary.⁴

Interviews took place in empty classrooms away from the principal's office. All of the teachers told me that I could interview students at any time, but I tried to conduct

³See the Appendix for full interview schedules for students, teachers, and principals.

⁴ The interview consent forms I received included one student at each school who I had not been allowed to observe. Both of these forms were signed by the same parents who signed the earlier forms preventing me from observing their children, indicating that they may have grown more comfortable with my research project as time passed and they heard about what I was doing from their children.

interviews only when the rest of the class had time to work individually at their desks. I seemed to be more concerned with the students missing important material in class than either the students or the teachers. I suspect that this is because most of the students were used to leaving the classroom during the day for additional instruction, to work on special projects, or to practice for activities such as Math Bowl. Interviews lasted between 15 and 45 minutes, with most taking 25 to 35 minutes. Most of the classrooms in which I conducted interviews had windows next to the doors and I was careful to sit facing the door with my participants in front of me so that their faces would not be seen by others passing in the hallway, providing a measure of protection in case our discussion made them emotional. While most students seemed interested in the interview topics and gave thoughtful answers, none of them appeared to suffer negative emotional reactions to my questions. After their interviews, a few students described the experience to their classmates as “fun.”

Because I spent time with students from every social group at each school, it is reasonable to question whether students in any single group were able to feel completely comfortable with me. Researchers such as Eckert (1989) and Kinney (1993, 1999), however, have had success at combining observations with interviews of a wide range of students. Like these studies of high school cliques and crowds, I believe that my broad focus on “how fifth graders get along” prevented any one group from feeling that my relationships with students in other groups made me untrustworthy. The fact that I talked with students from all social groups and worked to prevent any particular group from “claiming” me (when students asked me to sit by them at lunch I frequently responded that I had sat with them during my previous visit and needed to sit by somebody else

because I was interested in how *all* fifth graders get along) likely helped. Indeed, I was able to interview students from each of the social groups at both schools and students often mentioned others by name in their interviews, even when they knew I had also interviewed those they were talking about.

INTERVIEWING ADULTS

After all student interviews were complete, I began interviewing teachers, staff members, and principals from each school. In addition to the four fifth grade teachers and two principals, I chose staff members who were frequently on duty during fifth grade lunch and recess. While I had purposely waited to interview the adults, beginning in the last three weeks of school, in order to prevent them from changing their behavior toward either the students or me, I was also nervous about my level of rapport with them. Unlike the students, with whom I had spent many hours before interviewing them, my conversations with the adults were typically brief and related to the students. The possibility also existed that they saw me as strange. Although I had been invited to eat lunch in the teacher's lounge, I ate school lunches with students in the cafeteria. I spent recesses playing games with the students, including tag, and I must have looked ridiculous running around on the playground. In many ways, I knew no more about the adults' experiences in the school than I had the first time I was in fifth grade.

Interviews with adults took place at a time and location of their choosing, which typically fell during time that they had available for class preparation. Because I was unsure how the adults viewed me, I began by emphasizing that I was interested in an adult's perspective and used a discussion of their teaching careers to help establish rapport. I also found that my knowledge of the students allowed me to display empathy

when they were discussing particular incidents or behaviors that were difficult to deal with. These ten interviews ranged in length from 37 minutes to 90 minutes, with most lasting around an hour. Most also seemed interested in sharing their perspectives on student behavior and discipline. In the end, I felt affirmed in my goals by a statement that Mr. White, the principal of Greenfield Elementary, made near the end of his interview. When I asked if there was anything that I might have missed, he said,

You did a pretty good job. ((laughs)). What impressed me was that you were trying to become infused into the class. You did an excellent job of trying to and, and becoming a part of the class and, and you know, I think probably the kids, through that, are probably more apt to open up to you. So I mean, I just, the comment I would make is that you did a wonderful job of becoming part of it and trying to enter into their world.

DATA ANALYSIS

Between December 2007 and May 2008 I spent over 430 hours in the two schools combined and conducted 63 total interviews. My seat in the back of each classroom gave me opportunities to write quick field notes while the students worked at their desks, which I supplemented with notes taken during trips to the restroom and notes taken in my car at the end of each day. When I arrived home I expanded my brief notes and, when possible, I revisited these notes to look for patterns and to identify important interview topics. In addition to my field notes I recorded over 33 hours of audio data during my interviews, which were transcribed in detail. After transcription was complete I used Atlas.ti to code field notes and interview transcripts. I then examined all of the cases within a particular code to ensure that they fit and to look for patterns in the data by sorting these cases into sub-categories. For example, I coded for student responses to the question, “What does bullying mean to you?” and then examined these responses, noting how many males and females in each of the four fifth grade classes considered bullying

to consist of physical actions, verbal actions, or both. By doing so I was able to look for potential differences based on gender, school, and teacher while also checking for outliers, such as the two students who included excluding a classmate in their definitions of bullying.

While I was able to examine a number of potential differences, there are some differences that cannot be examined based on the location of my study. The location of these schools in a largely white area of the rural Midwest prevents me from examining racial or ethnic differences, which may affect students' interpretations of bullying. While I can compare the two schools I have studied, the fact that they are the same school district suggests that they are not likely to represent the entire range of experiences that students have in rural elementary schools. Finally, because I focus on fifth graders, my results do not represent the entire elementary experience since younger students may be bullied by older ones. With these limitations in mind, this study demonstrates the importance of looking at the culture that surrounds bullying in schools, which will hopefully be continued in other locations and grade levels.

In comparison to previous research, this project increases our understanding of how students, teachers, staff members, and principals actually define and respond to interactions such as bullying. By combining participant observation with semi-structured interviews, I was able to gain in-depth knowledge of Greenfield and Hillside Elementary as well as individuals' thoughts about topics that did not frequently come up in conversation. During my participant observation I was able to see how students interacted with their classmates and their teachers while my interviews gave me insight into the approaches that students and teachers brought to these interactions. The ability

to consider teachers' perspectives in their interactions with students combined with students perspectives on those interactions and their own responses lead to a more complex view of bullying as part of a school mini-culture. As a result, the following chapters provide a much-needed sociological perspective on these complex social interactions.

Chapter Three

STUDENT DEFINITIONS OF BULLYING

Definitions of bullying in the literature are easy to come by. For example, Sullivan, Cleary, and Sullivan (2004:3, emphasis in original) define bullying as “a *negative* and often *aggressive or manipulative* act or series of acts by one or more people against another person or people usually over a period of time. It is *abusive* and is based on an *imbalance of power*.” These actions can take the form of verbal abuse, physical abuse (or attempted physical abuse), or indirect abuse through hand gestures, facial expressions, or systematically ignoring, excluding, or isolating an individual (Olweus 1993; Ambert 1995; Sullivan et al. 2004). The majority of bullying actions such as these take place in and around schools, where children are brought together with their peers.

While a complete picture of negative peer interactions in U.S. schools has not been assembled, estimates on the number of U.S. elementary students affected by bullying range from 19 percent (Pellegrini, Bartini, and Brooks 1999) to 30 percent (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development 2001). A national report on indicators of school crime and safety found that 24 percent of primary schools report

daily or weekly student bullying (Dinkes, Cataldi, Kena, and Baum 2006). The same report breaks bullying down by type for middle and high schools, finding that 28 percent of students between 12 and 18 years old reported having been bullied at school during the past six months. Of these students, 19 percent said they had been made fun of, 15 percent said they were the subject of rumors, and 9 percent said that they were pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on.

Despite the variety of estimates concerning the effects of bullying, these studies are alike in that the definitions of researchers largely ignore contextual cues that students use to interpret the wide range of potentially negative peer interactions that are a part of their daily lives at school. While Naylor et al. (2006) examine students' definitions of bullying, these definitions are gained through student responses to a survey question and do not include observations of student behavior. Simultaneously attempting to make sense of one schoolyard interaction may be students who are directly involved, students who are bystanders, and school staff who may or may not have witnessed the interaction, yet researchers have not thoroughly examined the ways in which these distinct groups make sense of the contextual cues necessary to correctly interpret these interactions. This problem is magnified by survey researchers who create their own definitions of negative behavior that may or may not be shared with those who are actually in a given interaction, but who draw conclusions from their data nonetheless. In this chapter, I examine student definitions of bullying based on interview responses in addition to participant observation. This allows me to go beyond previous research by examining the social contexts of elementary school to understand bullying from the perspective of the students. This approach also allows me to understand how student definitions of and

reactions to behavior that can be defined as bullying differ both within and across peer groups.

RESEARCHER PERSPECTIVES

Before examining student perspectives on bullying it is important to note a change in my own perspective. Prior to beginning my observations, I thought of bullying as the sort of false dichotomy that is often depicted in the literature and media. As discussed in Chapter One, individuals who view bullying as a false dichotomy attempt to label students as either bullies or non-bullies, ignoring the continuum of actions taken by a wide variety of students that can be considered bullying. Entering the schools, I saw a lot of behavior that was potentially negative, such as students insulting, hitting, or shoving each other, but I did not see many students who might fit the traditional notions of bullies. Instead, I began to notice the ways discussed below that students defined themselves as non-bullies despite behaviors that could be considered bullying. In response to my changing perspective on bullying, I added a number of additional questions to my planned interview schedule, including a complete revision of my questions concerning bullying. My initial question about the school's rules regarding bullying had been conceived in the context of comparing how students at Hillside and Greenfield Elementary dealt with the bullies that I had imagined before beginning my research. Following the beginning of my fieldwork I changed my questions to focus on students' interpretations of what bullying means and what a bully is. I also added a question to determine whether students' perceptions differed from my own initial interpretation that there were few, if any stereotypical bullies. This experience is consistent with the argument of Eder and Fingerson (2002) that a period of observation is

essential before interviewing in order to obtain a general understanding of the local culture. Without these observations, I would have asked different questions and, likely, drawn different conclusions due to my lack of understanding of the culture of student interactions in these schools. Although my understanding of the school culture did not mean that I always agreed with my participants, I was able to understand their perspectives, which are discussed here.

STUDENT DEFINITIONS OF BULLYING

When asked what bullying means to them, a number of students pointed to media depictions of bullying, such as taking somebody's lunch money. For example, Phil defined bullying as "taking other people's lunch money and hitting people for no reason, stuffing people in lockers," sandwiching the more locally-oriented "hitting people for no reason" between two popular media depictions. The influence of media depictions on Phil's statement is obvious, as neither Hillside nor Greenfield Elementary had lockers. Other students were more careful about denoting the source of their images. As Josh noted, "In *movies* it's usually pulling a kid by their shirt, pushing them into the wall, beating them up for their lunch money." Similarly, Marshall argued that when bullies are seen on TV "they like throw them in a trash can or something." When media depictions such as these were cited, some students were careful to differentiate between these stereotypes and the realities that they faced in their own school. Marcy defined bullying as "Picking on them, but not like on TV shows, where you see, like, stealing their lunch money and stuff. It's not like that."

Although the types of bullying students have observed in the media center on physical actions such as taking lunch money and placing people in lockers and trash cans,

students described the reality of bullying by citing a wide range of behaviors. Over half of the students named emotional forms of bullying including threatening, teasing, insulting, exclusion, and spreading rumors about others. In addition to these emotional attacks, three quarters of students described bullying using a broad range of physical actions, including pushing, fighting, kicking, punching, ganging up on individuals, and using physical advantages against smaller, weaker opponents. Broadly defined, these actions are in line with the researcher-formulated definitions used in the literature.

Important differences arose, however, when students expanded on the difference between bullies and non-bullies. In doing so, students went beyond the realm of current survey definitions to highlight a wide array of qualifications, which correspond to their ideas of social justice and reveal interesting justifications for their own potentially negative behavior.

Intentions Matter

The issue of intentionality was at the center of these qualifications. Students were careful to point out in their definitions of bullying that the actions of a bully are not accidental. Jim, for example, noted that a bully is “Someone who picks on people for fun and, like, physical contact and likes to make people sad or mad. Like, someone who likes to be mean to other kids.” In Jim’s view, then, a bully is somebody who enjoys hurting others. Leann’s view of bullying was slightly different, arguing that bullies are “People being mean to other people that are, like, innocent and you just don’t like ‘em [the innocent people] so you try to hurt ‘em.” This definition adds an important layer to the definition of bullying that many students share – the idea that the victim of a bully did not do anything to deserve the bully’s attack. One in five students argued that the term

bullying is only appropriate when a behavior is unprovoked. As such, it involves “being mean to other people that weren’t doing anything,” as Sean noted, or “Hurting people for no reason,” as Joel stated.

Coinciding with the assertion that the victims of bullies must be innocent, some students were careful to separate self-defense and retaliation from their definitions of bullying. After stating that beating another person up or giving somebody a wedgie makes somebody a bully, I asked Randy whether everybody who does those sorts of things is a bully. He responded, “Yeah, unless they’re being- unless somebody’s picking on them first. They’re not really being a *bully*, they’re defending themselves.” Luke shared this view, stating, “They might just be defending themselves, so yeah, they might not be a bully but they might just be, like, a nerd being picked on by a bully.” Even though the actions could be the same, then, it is clear that, for these students, definitions of bullying did not include retaliation. Further, Chad discussed degrees of retaliation: “I wouldn’t say that making fun is really bullying. Well, if it’s like, fair, you know? ... If it’s being mean back and a little bit more I’d say it’s fair.”

Rationalizing Negative Behavior

Just as the students above argue that negative behaviors are warranted if they are retaliatory or in self-defense, some students pointed to other interactions that they felt should not be considered bullying. This was most often seen when students discussed their siblings and younger students. As Maggie notes, “There are some people who bully and nobody ever thinks they’re a bully because, like the smaller kids- the older kids kinda pick on them on the bus and nobody ever thinks of that older kid as a bully because *everyone* picks on the little kids.” Like those that Maggie describes, Jill doesn’t consider

herself a bully for being mean to her younger brother, stating, “Oh, no, I think of myself as a normal big sister.” Kathy expresses an opinion similar to Jill’s after stating that she sometimes bites her younger sister:

K: Well, she would consider me a bully.

I: She would consider you-

K: Yes.

I: But you don’t consider yourself a bully?

K: No.

I: ... Why would you not consider yourself a bully?

K: ‘Cause its sibling rivalry.

Not only does Kathy rationalize her behavior toward her younger sister, she does so by calling it “sibling rivalry,” a term which ignores the age and size differences between the two of them.

While Maggie demonstrates that some students *did* recognize picking on younger students and siblings as bullying, her statement that “*everyone* picks on the little kids” also suggests the high degree to which this behavior has been rationalized by students. At Greenfield Elementary there were several times that I witnessed Kyle take basketballs from younger students who were using them and kick basketballs away from younger students that were coming to retrieve them (Fieldnotes, 12/19/07, 12/20/07). Although Kyle was not big in comparison to the other fifth graders, he was taller and stronger than most of the younger students. Thus the imbalance of power that Sullivan, Cleary, and Sullivan (2004) cite as a key aspect of their definition of bullying is dismissed by students as normal in the context of relationships with younger students or siblings.

Some students also commented on using this advantage while they could, since they were the biggest students in elementary school but would be smallest when they entered middle school the following year. As Maggie noted, in middle school “We’ll be the youngest and everybody will wanna pick on you. Because you’re the target, you’re the smallest.”

It’s Not Bullying if You’re Joking

Just as the older and younger students likely have differing interpretations of whether behaviors such as these are “normal,” actions that are considered – or claimed to be – joking by one student, can also lead to differing interpretations. Leann argues that being mean is not bullying “If they’re just joking around and the other person is okay with it and think its kinda fun or something.” When asked what the difference is between somebody who is pushing another student and *is* a bully and somebody who is pushing another student but is not, Tim replied, “The person who pushes somebody around that is not a bully could be like a friend that’s joking around and a person who is pushing someone around that is a bully is probably somebody that’s really, really serious and doesn’t care if he gets in trouble or anything.” Chelsie notes how the grey area of joking can be used to get out of potential trouble, stating “Well if they’re joking around, like, say they’re sorry or like if they steal money or something they can be like, ‘I’m just kidding, you can have your money back.’”

While roughly a quarter of students do not consider jokes to be bullying, it can be hard to tell when somebody is using joking as a cover, as Chelsie suggests, and whether the target really is “okay with it,” as Leann notes is important. This difficulty is evident

in the following excerpt from Marcy's interview, which began after I asked her if there are any bullies in the fifth grade at Greenfield Elementary:

M: Maybe one, but not really a bully, bully. Just kind of, like, occasionally can be a little annoying. Like, bother you and make you feel uncomfortable occasionally but if you go out of control, like, "I can't hold it in any more" and you just immediately just yell "*Stop it!*" they'll be like, "I was just playing." But, then you know they weren't just playing, they were just kinda being mean occasionally and stuff, so-

I: So do you think that maybe their definition of playing is different than other people's?

M: Yeah.

I: Like when they think they're just playing other people are taking it a different way?

M: Yeah, they're taking it a different way. They're like, this isn't just playing. It might be playing for you but it's not playing for us.

Marcy highlights the way that one student's "joking" can be interpreted differently by the target of this behavior. Combining this with Chelsie's statement above that a student may claim to be "just kidding" when stealing from a classmate, one can see the ways that students attempt to manipulate others' interpretations of their intentions. As Marcy demonstrates, this manipulation is sometimes successful (these behaviors are only "occasionally" annoying) and sometimes not.

Marcy's discussion of the potentially differing interpretations of "just playing" begin to highlight the importance of context in student definitions of bullying. The way that "just playing" can transition into "being mean" is evident in the way that events surrounding the following field note unfold:

From across the gym I saw Ryan lying on his back holding his stomach with the two supervisors and a small group of students gathered around him. I walked over and asked Steven, who was sitting on the bleachers,

what had happened. He said that some people were playing dodgeball and Ryan got hit in the stomach (I later learned that Will kicked Ryan in the chest after Ryan, Ted, and Brian had been throwing balls at Will's head) and couldn't breathe. ... A few minutes later Brian and Ted approached me. Ted was holding a kickball and asked to trade me for the basketball that I was holding. I said no and then asked why, resting the basketball in my hand. Brian took the basketball and said that they wanted to throw it at Will but I took it back and said that I couldn't let them have it for that. They walked away (Fieldnote, 3/11/08).

At Hillside elementary, Ryan, Ted, Brian, and Marshall are friends and Will is a common target for them. Below is an excerpt from Ted's interview, which took place on April 9, nearly a month after the incident described here:

I: What does bullying mean to you?

T: Yeah, we do it sometimes.

I: You think so? So what kinds of things would make somebody a bully?

T: Doing what we did to Will.

I: So can somebody do things like that and not be a bully?

T: Yeah, 'cause Will at first he was telling us to throw balls at him because he said he could dodge them, so we threw them at his face, he can't dodge the ones that were coming at his face.

I: Are there any bullies in the fifth grade here?

T: There's a lot of 'em. ... Knowing, like, the fun bullies that have fun with it, like egg it on, probably me, Ryan, Brian, Marshall, Ben, Jared- yeah. We pick on the nerds and everything.

While Ted states that Will was encouraging their actions, he also accepts that his actions can be seen as bullying. He is careful to note, though, that they are "the fun bullies"

because they have fun with picking on the nerds. Like the students who rationalize

negative behaviors against younger students or siblings, Ted's redefinition of his group of

friends as “fun bullies” can be seen as an attempt to rationalize picking on those who are seen as “nerds.”

Although there are some similarities, Marshall’s view of whether or not they are bullies differs substantially from Ted’s, as seen in the following interview excerpt:

M: We don’t, well, we’re probably not bullies but, um, we usually, like, pick on kids, but it’s not like we’re walking up to someone and giving ‘em a wedgie or something. We sometimes just like play around. We’re usually not very mad at all.

I: So you think if you were, like, just kind of playing around picking on somebody, do you think that they know that you’re playing around or do they take it more seriously?

M: Well, it’s sometimes the kids in our class like Joey and Mario and, like, the other kids that are kinda like nerds, they’ll probably think that we’re not playing around with them and stuff. They might go tell just to get us in trouble.

I: So you think they kinda take things more seriously than other people might?

M: Yeah. Well, Joey does....

I: So what kinds of things would you say make someone a bully?

M: Probably just, like, punching kids and everything, not caring what they’re doing. Like Steven, he’s not really a bully but he doesn’t really care what he does. ...

I: So can somebody do those things and not be a bully?

M: Probably. Maybe. Like, usually bullies don’t get straight As or anything, ‘cause they’re just too dumb. If they’re a bully they’re probably just going to pick on kids and everything, not do work, but me, Ted, Ryan, Brian, we’re probably not bullies ‘cause we usually get As and Bs mostly....

I: So do you think that there are any bullies in the fifth grade here?

M: Probably not. I don’t really think so, ‘cause there’s nobody that goes around punching everybody or doing something to everyone... Like me, I was in basketball *and* Math Bowl and Spell Bowl, so that’s like

two different things, so I'm like in the middle [between the nerds and those who don't get good grades].

I: So there's a lot of middle ground?

M: Yeah, like Ryan and Ted and Brian, they're all in choir...

Both Ted and Marshall agree that they do these things for fun rather than in an attempt to retaliate or hurt the feelings of others. As Marshall points out, they're "usually not very mad at all." In contrast to Ted's label of "the fun bullies," however, Marshall defines bullying more narrowly. Although he recognizes that the actions of his group of friends are on the border of bullying, Marshall uses other factors such as grades and extracurricular activities to justify his belief that they are "probably not bullies."

THE FALSE DICHOTOMY

Even within a group of friends, it is clear that the interpretations of the same actions can differ. While Ted says "we do it sometimes" regarding bullying, indicating that it is possible to be a bully in one circumstance and not a bully in another, Marshall looks at people in terms of a false dichotomy that divides others into either bullies or non-bullies, arguing that if somebody is to be labeled a bully, he or she must fit that label at all times. A number of the students shared this view that the terms bully and non-bully are mutually exclusive and attempted to place others into one category or the other. Through this false dichotomy, students ignored the continuum of behaviors that ranges from bullying to non-bullying and the fact that a student might participate in bullying in one instance (e.g. pushing another student in the hallway, insulting someone) and non-bullying in another (e.g. doing well on a math test, joking with friends). In this way, we can differentiate between noun-centered views of a false dichotomy that attempts to identify *bullies* and verb-centered views that attempt to identify *bullying*. The students'

use of this false dichotomy was perhaps most evident in the case of Kathy, a student at Hillside Elementary. Kathy is an interesting example because she is not easy to categorize as popular or unpopular compared to the other students at Hillside. While she often does things with the popular group of girls, including playing on the school's basketball team, she is not friends with the popular boys. Compared to the other girls, Kathy is average height, but heavier. At recess, Kathy frequently plays sports with the popular girls and those who say that they do not like her.

Based on her behavior at school, one might label Kathy a bully. For example, she frequently kicks students sitting across from her at the lunch table, despite them telling her to stop. In the classroom, she does things with the apparent intention of bothering others, including the popular girls, as the following field note indicates:

While lining up for lunch in the classroom Kathy reached out and snapped Brittney's bra. Brittney moved forward in line to a place where Kathy couldn't reach her. Kathy slapped David, who was now in front of her, on the back in the same area (Fieldnote, 3/11/08).

Additionally, Kathy frequently pushes and argues with other students at recess. This typically occurs when playing sports such as basketball, but Chelsie indicates in the following interview excerpt that Kathy is physical with students at other times as well:

C: We were playing tag, and she pushed me down and um, her fist, um-she just came over and punched my chin.

I: So did she mean to do it or was she...

C: I think she did it on purpose 'cause she went, *yeah*. She said something and went over to me, knocked me down and punched me.

While Kathy's actions toward other students caused some to see her as a bully, others saw her as a victim based on the behavior of others toward her. In the classroom, Kathy was frequently told to "shut up" and "sit down" by the other students, especially

the popular group of boys. When the class was discussing the upcoming presidential election with their teacher, one student asked whether they would be putting on a program like the fifth graders did for the 2004 election, in which students acted as the candidates. Kathy immediately said that she wanted to be Hillary Clinton and Ben said, “you can’t, you’re too fat.” Mr. Erickson, their teacher, didn’t respond to this but did say that the fifth graders would be gone by the time November came and that they probably do something in middle school (Fieldnote, 1/29/08). When Chad, who was not in Kathy’s class, stated in his interview that he had seen a student being mean to another student the previous day and I asked him what happened, he responded:

C: Oh, they were just making fun of this really fat, ugly girl and I did too.

I: Was it like a younger girl or?

C: Kathy

I: Oh you were making fun of Kathy. So what- who was making fun of her? What was going on?

C: The whole other class, pretty much.

I: Was it like lunch time or when was it?

C: Lunch time and recess.

I: What were people saying?

C: Just, like, saying that she’s fat and throwing balls at her.

Based on her interactions with others, students tended to see Kathy either as a bully or a victim, as students argue in the following field note:

At lunch the students were talking about bullies and Abigail turned around and pointed to Kathy, who was sitting behind her, and said that Kathy is a bully. Kathy leaned around the end of the seat and made a face when she heard Abigail talking about her and Abigail acted surprised to see her,

though she did not back down from her statement. Kaci said, “No, Kathy is *bullied*” (Fieldnote, 2/21/08).

By focusing their attention on Kathy rather than her interactions, students created a false dichotomy as indicated in Marshall’s interview – that students are either bullies or they are not, and that a student’s designation is based not on a single interaction but on the whole of his or her behaviors. Just as Marshall argued he and his friends were not bullies because of their grades and extracurricular activities, students tried to decide whether Kathy was a bully or victim based on their knowledge of her interactions with others. Moving past this dichotomy, I argue that Kathy was both a bully *and* bullied, depending on the situation. For example:

While playing basketball at recess Jerry was dribbling the ball and Kathy was heading toward him. Jerry got on his knees with the ball on his lap and put his arms around it, bending over the ball to protect it. Kathy put her arms around him to try to take the ball despite the fact that Jerry was nearly covering it. Jared kicked Kathy’s shoulder. Ben came from behind her and kicked Kathy on the bottom of her shoe. The supervisor blew her whistle and told Kathy to stop and to come over to her. Kathy said that Jared didn’t have to kick her in the shoulder. The supervisor called Jared over, too, and talked to them for a few minutes (Fieldnote, 3/4/08).

In the above example, Kathy acted aggressively toward Jerry but her actions did not warrant the kicks she received from Jared and Ben. Students considering Kathy’s behavior through the lens of this false dichotomy, however, attempted to place her in a clearly defined category, viewing “bully” and “victim” as mutually exclusive. Looking at all of the definitions taken together, Kathy is a bully *and* is bullied, depending on the situation, just as Ted and Marshall sometimes bully others and other times participate in Math Bowl or choir.

COMPARISONS BETWEEN SCHOOLS

As discussed in the previous chapter, this study was originally intended to examine differences between a school with a peer mediation program (Hillside Elementary) and one without (Greenfield Elementary). While the peer mediation program ended the year before my observations, such a program could conceivably impact student definitions of bullying. Because of this, it is somewhat surprising to find almost no discernable between-school differences in the definitions that students reported. Similar numbers of students at Hillside and Greenfield stated that physical abuse, verbal abuse, and both came to mind when asked what bullying means to them. There is, however, one area in which Hillside's former peer mediation program may have had a small impact. Of the 53 students interviewed, only two mentioned social exclusion in their definitions of bullying and both attended Hillside Elementary. One of these students noted during her interview that she had been a peer mediator during the previous school year. While this may have influenced her definition of bullying, it is worth noting that other students who had been peer mediators did not include exclusion in their definitions. The fact that both of the students who mentioned social exclusion as a form of bullying were female is also the only clear gender difference in students' definitions.

Another area that a peer mediation program could conceivably impact is student beliefs about whether or not any of the students in their school are bullies. Interestingly, the students that I interviewed from Hillside were more likely than their counterparts at Greenfield to state that there were no bullies in fifth grade at their school. While I cannot be sure that this difference is due to the presence of a peer mediation program, it is possible that this program may have depicted bullying using the type of false dichotomy

described above, leading students, like Marshall, to define away the problem of bullying. Overall, nearly two thirds of students reported that there were bullies in fifth grade at their school, with no clear distinctions between males and females.

DISCUSSION

While one might expect differences in definitions based on student popularity, I found no clear distinctions between popular and unpopular students. The “nerds” that Ted and Marshall reported making fun of were no more likely to report bullies at Hillside than the more popular students such as Jared and Chelsie. Even Joey, who Marshall described as more likely than others to take jokes seriously, stated that he did not think there were any bullies in fifth grade at Hillside. In considering these statements it is important to remember that students used their own definitions of bullying when reporting whether or not they believed there were bullies in fifth grade at their schools. Joey, for instance, defined bullying for fifth graders as “beating someone up, taking their lunch money.” If he had defined bullying as making fun of others, he may have answered differently.

This example demonstrates the complex nature of student definitions of bullying. For these students, a single act has multiple potential meanings. While Marshall may interpret his behaviors toward Joey as insults directed toward a nerd, Joey may interpret Marshall’s behaviors as jokes between friends and Math Bowl teammates. (It is interesting that the same activities that Marshall uses to differentiate himself from bullies may lead Joey to do the same.) This demonstrates the way that a noun-centered false dichotomy of bullying encourages students to move past labels for individual actions to labels for people and to depend on these labels for interpretations of future interactions.

If Joey labels Marshall a friend rather than a bully, his subsequent interactions with Marshall will likely be interpreted in this light. Similarly, students who label others “bullies” may be more likely to interpret future interactions with these individuals negatively, potentially contributing to feelings of alienation.

While complex, the conflicting labels that students have for Kathy reinforce this conclusion. Abigail’s belief that Kathy is a bully and Kaci’s belief that Kathy is bullied likely become self-fulfilling prophecies that influence their interpretations of Kathy’s behaviors. Perhaps because of her contentious relationships with a number of students, a single label for Kathy’s behavior did not emerge among the students. The difficulty of placing a single label on Kathy’s behavior serves as a reminder that the relationships of other students, while more subtle, are likely to be similarly complex. For example, while Marshall may not define himself as a bully because of his extracurricular activities and some students, like Joey, may share the definition that he has for himself, other “nerds” like Mario may not feel the same way.

In exploring labels placed on bullies and bullying by students one must consider the potential for researcher influence. While students at both schools were obviously familiar with the term, bullying was not typically a part of their daily discussions. Upon entering the schools I told students that I was interested in “how fifth graders get along” and was careful not to mention bullying. As I began interviewing students, however, their use of terms like “bully” and “bullied” increased. The example above in which Abigail calls Kathy a bully and Kaci responds that Kathy is bullied, for instance, occurred at lunch following a morning interview with another girl at the table, whom the students had asked about the types of questions I asked during the interview.

Given the wide range of topics discussed in these interviews, the fact that students often noted discussing bullying when others asked about the interview questions suggests that bullying was a salient topic for students even though they did not frequently talk about it. Instead, when students talked about negative behavior they typically described others as “being mean” or noted the behaviors that had taken place. This highlights the disjuncture between student culture and the use of “anti-bullying” messages in schools because students recognized that they sometimes participated in “mean” behaviors but did not consider themselves to be bullies, which allowed them to dismiss anti-bullying messages as not relevant to their lives. The fact that students used verb-centered descriptions of negative behavior when discussing meanness, however, reinforces my use of a verb-centered definition of bullying, even if different terms were used.

Just as students have different perspectives on meanness and bullying, during my time in the schools my own perspectives on bullying diverged from those of the students. For instance, while negative behavior toward younger students and siblings fits typical definitions of bullying because it relies on an imbalance of power, many students and some adults viewed it as a part of the general nature of peer relationships. While Ambert (1995) focuses on peer abuse among those close in age, she situates this abuse in the context of child abuse more generally and includes abuse by siblings in this broader definition. This topic can be better addressed in future research by exploring whether students believe that negative behavior toward younger peers or siblings is *ever* bullying. It is possible that a distinction may be drawn between siblings who are “negotiating the border” between playful and hurtful interactions as friends might (Oswald 1992) and those who are actively abusing one another. In this way, students may define their

playful interactions as “normal” or “sibling rivalry” while acknowledging that these actions can sometimes go too far.

CONCLUSION

Although students were quick to point to media depictions of bullying such as taking somebody’s lunch money, their actual definitions encompassed a much wider range physical and emotional attacks. While these actions are in line with those used to define bullying in the literature, students added a number of qualifications beyond whether or not they had been insulted or pushed by another student. In defining what was not bullying, students stated that behaviors toward younger students and siblings were part of being, as Jill said, “a normal big sister.” Similarly, Maggie argued that “*everyone* picks on the little kids.” By rationalizing negative behavior in these contexts, students dismiss a key aspect of bullying as defined in the literature, the presence of an imbalance of power.

Students also rationalized negative behaviors in the context of joking and retaliation. Because of the potential for differing interpretations, however, jokes formed a sort of grey area. Students understood that jokes were not meant to be taken seriously, but they also understood that serious behaviors could be committed under the guise of joking in order to avoid retaliation. This strategy is also used to try to lessen the negative consequences of bullying in light of teachers’ responses, as discussed in Chapter Five. Further, “just playing” can quickly transition into “being mean,” as the interaction between Ryan, Ted, Brian, Marshall, and Will demonstrates. By defining his group of friends as “fun bullies,” Ted works to rationalize picking on “the nerds” as a fun activity.

While Ted admits that his group of friends participates in a form of (albeit fun) bullying, Marshall defines bullying more narrowly, arguing that their grades and extracurricular activities separate them from bullies who do not care about these sorts of things. In doing so, Marshall creates a false dichotomy between bullies and non-bullies. In this false dichotomy, a noun-centered definition of bullying is used to argue that if somebody is labeled a bully, he or she must fit that label all of the time. This differs from an verb-centered definition of bullying that allows room for students to be bullies when making fun of others and non-bullies when practicing for Math Bowl. For students such as Marshall, noun-centered definitions of bullying allow for the continuation of negative behaviors while asserting that they are not bullies. For schools such as Greenfield and Hillside Elementary, then, attempts by teachers and principals to create “bully-free” environments may prevent students from applying these labels to themselves or others. The fact that students have redefined bullying so as to preclude themselves from this definition, however, does not change the underlying student behaviors. In Chapter Four we will see that some adults define bullying in the same way.

Chapter Four

ADULT PERSPECTIVES

Outside the cafeteria of Hillside Elementary is a large sign that reads “Bully Free Zone.” Hillside fifth graders have also been exposed to peer mediation, including some who were trained to solve conflicts between their classmates. During my field work, however, the fifth grade students at Hillside often seemed meaner to each other than students at Greenfield Elementary, whether taking each other’s things in the classroom or fighting for a basketball on the playground. While a sign alone cannot change the character of a school and the effects of a peer mediation program may fade with the loss of the grant money that funded it, these discrepancies highlight the inherent difficulty in drawing conclusions about the effects of a school’s structure and policies on the behavior of its students. As each of the ten teachers, principals, and staff members that I interviewed noted, the behavior of fifth grade students at Greenfield and Hillside Elementary schools changes from year to year. The willingness to use student reputations in disciplinary decisions contributes to the socially constructed nature of “bullies,” in which bullying becomes associated with individual students rather than with

actions. This demonstrates the importance of moving away from noun-centered definitions in order to view bullying as part of a complex system of peer relations and student/teacher dynamics. As a result, it is necessary to consider the structural and cultural differences between schools, teachers, and principals and discuss the ways that these differences may have affected student behavior. To do so I rely on the knowledge of the adults in these settings combined with their definitions of bullying, interpretations of student behavior, and the challenges they face in preventing negative interactions between students.

ADULT PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL CLIMATE

Before discussing adult definitions of bullying, it is important to understand how teachers viewed bullying in the context of the school. While media depictions of school shootings may lead one to believe that today's students are worse than those in the past, not all agree with this assertion. Mrs. Hunter, a Title I Aide at Greenfield Elementary, notes that in her 18 years in the school she has seen several cycles of student behavior. She states, "There'll be a group of students that just can't seem to get along with each other and basically it stays within that grade, their own classmates, more than associating with the other kids but it just sort of goes in cycles like that. And then maybe for a couple years we'll have everything just go really smooth and they'll get along fine and bang you've got the same situation over." While Hunter supports the argument that student behavior in a particular grade changes from year to year, she does not claim to have seen an overall decline in behavior. Similarly, Mr. Erickson, a teacher in his 33rd year at Hillside Elementary, answers:

I really don't think there's been that big of a change. I mean, a lot of people think there have, but I, uh, not so much. Seem like there's

obviously years when kids seem to get along better than others. I think that's probably just the mix up of the kids but um, I mean problems we've had today; we've had for thirty years... I know that things change for styles and things, the toys the kids have. Obviously those things are different, but I don't think the kids have changed all that much.

It was clear that the general context of the school was important to those I interviewed as, when I asked whether they had seen changes in the way students get along over the years, they responded with references to student respect and behavior toward adults as well as toward each other. This suggests that there is a meaningful connection for many of these adults between student behavior and the context in which it occurs. Mrs. Adrian, for example, who was in her first year at Greenfield after substitute teaching for thirteen years and then teaching kindergarten for five years at another school in the district, stated, "The behavior's much worse than it was when I started, like twenty-five years ago. Everything was- you had a lot more respect back then and, um, the kids were just calmer and, you know, they just did what you said and you had a lot more parental support." In all, four of the ten adults interviewed claimed that students were less likely to follow rules since they started working in schools, and all four noted lower levels of respect for adults and a lack of parental support. Mrs. Knight, principal of Hillside Elementary in her sixth year at the school and her 19th in elementary education, draws a connection between these topics and a perceived decline of authority in the larger society. She argues:

As the principal it troubles me how when I tell the kids to get quiet, they do it but to me, it should be absolute silence, and I don't think it's anything in my leadership. I think it's society. The kids aren't seeing the line between adults and children, between authority and non-authority. It bothers, like you'd watch the show - I don't watch the show *Cops*, you know? But if you turn through the channel and there it is and you watch for a few minutes, these people are kicking policemen, they're running from policemen. These kids are watching these things. And I just think

that the lines between right and wrong and who's in charge, they're fading. And I think it is harder to discipline kids. Now when you call a parent to say a child did something, it may be a two day argument between the parent and the school about, "Well, he really didn't really do it." Instead of the adults reporting it to you, this is what happened.

Combined, the perceived decline of respect for authority among students and a lack of parental support for the disciplinary decisions of teachers and principals put schools in a difficult position when dealing with serious student behaviors such as bullying.

EFFECTS OF SCHOOL STRUCTURE

Class Size

Another aspect of the school context that teachers felt had an important impact on student relations was class size. At Greenfield Elementary, the consensus among adults was that the majority of fifth grade students in this class were, as Mrs. Hunter puts it, "very easygoing and quiet." Hunter notes that there were a handful of "problem" students, "but they are certainly a lot better than some I've dealt with." Mrs. Lane concurs, stating that "behavior-wise, this is one of the better groups," but noting that she believed this was the result of the reduced class size. Prior to the beginning of the school year the district had been redrawn slightly, causing some of the students who had previously attended Hillside Elementary to begin attending Greenfield. This resulted in reduced class sizes in the two fifth grades at Hillside and the addition of a second fifth grade teacher at Greenfield, reducing class sizes there as well. As Lane states, "This is the first class I've had in a long time that had less than 25 kids. The last two years I've had over 30. So this year I think because, when the classes were divided, even though I did get some discipline problems, pulling them apart really helped my group." Mr. White, the Greenfield principal, agrees that for these students "This year was much better

than last year,” adding that “This particular group, though, throughout their whole career has probably been a little bit more challenging than others.”

While Lane’s class size was reduced dramatically, from over 30 students to fewer than 20, class sizes at Hillside were reduced only by two or three students, to 22 per class. Perhaps because of this, neither of the teachers at Hillside mentioned the change in class size. If the reduction in class size did have an effect, it may have been hidden by a difference in behavior when compared to the previous year. While the teachers and principal at Hillside Elementary state that the behavior of this fifth grade class is comparable to others they have seen, with perhaps a lower level of maturity or respect, Mrs. Neely states that in comparison to the previous class, “These [students] are pretty much out of control. Um, they seem to not have any respect for authority. Don’t listen for, you know, line up. They think that they can just walk down the hallways. They don’t, they just don’t seem to, the rules don’t pertain to them.”¹

Discipline

In comparison to class size, which was similar between schools, there were noticeable differences in the enforcement of school rules, which adds further context to the examination of how adults in these schools defined and dealt with problems such as bullying. In general, those at Greenfield Elementary adopted a more strict approach to discipline than their counterparts at Hillside. At Greenfield, students were expected to line up by class at the end of every recess and each group was then dismissed individually

¹ From my own perspective, students at Hillside seemed to talk more in the classroom than those at Greenfield, but the major differences in behavior were when students were walking through the hallway while other grades were in their classrooms. While students at Greenfield were mostly quiet and orderly at these times, those at Hillside often spoke loudly, walked next to each other instead of in lines, and pushed each other. Mrs. Neely was often in charge at these times the students did seem to be, as she states, “out of control.”

to walk back to their classroom. Near the end of the school year, I noticed that the adults who oversaw this process became markedly stricter, enforcing a rule that students were not supposed to talk to each other in line by taking time away from recess for violators. Although this rule had been in place throughout the school year, students had been allowed to talk quietly without retribution before this change. In her interview, Mrs.

Hunter explains the situation:

The moment they line up they're supposed to be quiet... It's been enforced, you know, but not just really drastically... Well, things got really out of hand and one morning recess. They were so disrespectful to one of the teachers that noon recess- I mean at morning recess, I was told to go out there and enforce that rule and be, for that one particular day, be *really* forceful to enforce it. So we're trying to keep 'em a little bit more in line. It- and it is fallin' away. It's, it's not workin' as well as it did there that first week, but, um, they are supposed to be lined up and be quiet.

After failing to enforce this particular rule for much of the year, the teachers were met with difficulty when they attempted to change their approach. As a testament to the precedent surrounding this rule, Mrs. Scott notes in her interview that she substitute taught at Greenville five years earlier and "When kids lined up they were in a line and didn't say one word... If there was like a fire drill, they walked out that door, stood in line, didn't say a word... And I would go to other schools, they didn't line up quiet at all, and here they did. That's always something that they had. This year has been a tough year because we have a lot of, you know, we have new teachers." These new teachers, she states, "were more lax and that type of stuff, especially at the beginning of the year. Then you realize if you give a little, you know it gets way too much. That's why you just can't hardly give at all."

Mrs. Scott's point that once you give up a particular level of control it is hard to regain was reflected in my interview with Mrs. Neely at Hillside, who agreed with this sentiment and stated that this group of fifth graders was "pretty much out of control." Notably, Neely argues that "it wasn't like that last year, so, or the year before that. So something has changed." Undoubtedly, the primary source of change is related to the students themselves, who Mr. Hanson noted had a reputation for bad behavior coming into fifth grade. She continued to wonder whether Erickson and Hanson were not as strict with their students as others in the school, such as "the art teachers and the music teacher and the aides." Both Erickson and Hanson had laid back styles and rarely raised their voices in anger, but they were able to maintain what they considered suitable levels of control over their classrooms without doing so. Further, the level of behavior that Erickson and Hanson found acceptable did not seem to be in line with the expectations of Neely and Wheeler.

The Importance of Being on the Same Page

As Mrs. Scott notes above, once students become accustomed to a particular type of behavior, it is hard to increase expectations. Due to the discipline styles of Erickson and Hanson, it appears that Neely and Wheeler were placed in this position several times a day as they attempt to convince students to conform to a different standard of behavior in the hallway, the lunchroom, and at recess than Erickson and Hanson enforced in the classroom. Although their behavior inside the classroom usually did not cause harm to others, outside of the classroom students had more opportunities to push, hit, or kick each other. Although these behaviors were typically between friends, they demonstrated to students that it was hard for Neely and Wheeler to enforce school rules. While Mrs. Lane

at Greenfield Elementary noted that the reputation of her incoming students caused her to “set on them harder because of how they were last year,” neither Erickson nor Hanson at Hillside reported making similar considerations, despite the similarly poor reputation of their incoming students.

In contrast to the differing approaches to behavior of teachers and staff members at Hillside, the teachers and staff members at Greenfield described expectations for student behavior that were shared across grade levels, even with several new teachers. Because of the school’s relative calm, Mrs. Adrian, in her first year at the school, noted that “somebody’s been doin’ something right for a long, a long time.” Adrian also received support and advice from Mrs. Lane, who discussed sharing approaches to discipline with the new teachers: “they’ll say, ‘Well, how did you handle that?’ and, you know, ‘What do you do if they do that?’ ... and that’s probably why we are so much on the same page because we’re kind of in the same mind... We all pretty much use the same assertive discipline type.” As a new teacher, Adrian demonstrates the other side of this relationship:

A: There’s been a lot of ways I’ve been lax this year that-that other teachers have told me they wouldn’t have allowed.

I: Oh really? Like what kinds of things are they...

A: Um, like I just haven’t reinforced things as much as I should of. On-I mean, it’s not been major stuff, but, um, just-for instance, just what I expect in the classroom. Some of ‘em just refuse to do it my way and I really just let it slide. Whereas before, I should-I mean, I think I should expect them to do what I asked them to do.

I: Yeah.

A: And one example is just cursive writing. I mean, there’s just three or four of them that just refuse. And I should have just not graded their papers, but, I did. And we’re just talkin’ about that today at lunch.

And some teachers said, you know, they wouldn't have even accepted it.

For Adrian, conversations such as these allow her to work to maintain classroom standards similar to those of the other teachers while these similar standards help the other teachers and staff members when dealing with Adrian's students outside of the classroom. In my interviews with Mrs. Wheeler and Mrs. Neely at Hillside, it was clear that they desire shared standards such as these due to the difficulties that differing standards present.

The Principal's Role

Another difference in discipline between the two schools was the amount of contact that fifth grade students had with the principal as part of their normal school day. At Greenfield Elementary, Mr. White was present in the cafeteria nearly every day when the students ate lunch. He was also sometimes present on the playground and in the gymnasium during indoor recess, though for shorter periods of time. Rather than seeing these duties as a chore, White mentioned them when asked what he most likes about his job, stating, "I try to get out. You know, I'm in the cafeteria about every day. I try to get out on the playground every day. Uh, you know, working with the kids, listening to them."

In contrast, Mrs. Knight at Hillside Elementary was rarely seen in the lunchroom while the fifth graders were eating and, when she was, it was typically for a special announcement that she wanted to tell all of the fifth graders at once. I also never saw her on the playground during my observations. The lack of her presence in these situations, however, should not be taken to mean that she does not care about her students. Each Monday morning White gathered all fourth and fifth grade students in an empty

classroom for “Life Skills,” an hour that included allowing students to share recent accomplishments, discuss difficult situations, learn about being good citizens of the school, and watch movies. Describing the range of things covered in Life Skills in her interview, Knight noted:

Ok, did something just happen in the office that I can take in there and talk about with the kids? ... I’ve taken all the [detentions] down before and not said kid’s names but said “Okay, these are the things that are happening in our school.” So really Life Skills to me is, uh, being able to talk to them about popularity, ok, you know, being, you want to be nice to the skateboard kids and the math and science kids and the band kids and you know, just anything like that that comes along.

Though White talked to students briefly over the course of the week at lunch and Knight spoke to fourth and fifth graders once a week for a longer period of time, both principals clearly valued sharing time with their students and being aware of the issues that affected their lives.

While Mr. White and Mrs. Knight both discussed disciplinary issues during their time with students, one of the benefits of White’s approach at Greenfield Elementary was that it provided him with a larger role in the disciplinary process. Because White was present in the cafeteria, students often reported problems directly to him and in these circumstances he dealt with them himself, just as one of the aides would. This also gave him the opportunity to set rules and ensure that they were being enforced. At Greenfield, students were not allowed to sit by others that they were “going with” or that they “liked” in a romantic sense.² There was no such rule at Hillside Elementary and occasionally aides such as Mrs. Neely would comment on student relationships in the cafeteria. White

² While behavior such as pushing can be detected by observation, it is impossible for an adult to determine whether two students who are sitting next to each other in the lunchroom without physical contact “like” each other or not. As a result, the enforcement of this rule depended on the reports of other students. The implications of this for bullying are discussed in Chapter Five.

saw this rule, which was in its first year of implementation during my observations, as a way to prevent problems with public displays of affection on the playground and on buses. Although students were allowed to be near romantic interests on the playground, White believes that preventing situations in one setting prevents their escalation in others, stating, “if you set the bar low, you’re going to wind up a certain set of, of, uh, activities before you reach that bar. If you set it up high, you know, it’s a little bit different.” Because White was present in the cafeteria nearly every day he was able to serve as the primary enforcer of this rule, while the enforcement of rules at Hillside elementary was much less centralized with Knight.

Lunch and Recess

Beyond disciplinary procedures, the free time of students at Hillside Elementary differed significantly from that at Greenfield Elementary. Because most of the behaviors that I observed that could be labeled bullying took place outside of structured class time, the amount of free time that students had at both schools affected the potential for these behaviors. As noted in Chapter Two, fifth grade students at Greenfield had about thirty more minutes of recess a day than their counterparts at Hillside. It is also important to note that while fifth graders at Greenfield ate lunch and had recess with third and fourth graders, those at Hillside ate lunch and had recess only with students in the other fifth grade classroom. When Knight began as principal of Hillside, sixth grade was still a part of the school and the lunch pairings were first and second, third and fourth, and fifth and sixth grades. When sixth grade became a part of middle school, Knight states, “Fifth then, they just kind of ended up on their own.” Students at Hillside also spent less time at recess than their counterparts at Greenfield. Knight shortened lunch recess and

eliminated afternoon recess in favor of a Friday afternoon movie for fourth and fifth graders who had completed their homework for the week. After a year, Knight decided that this time shouldn't be spent just on movies and implemented the Monday morning Life Skills meetings discussed above.

In general, adults at both schools held similar opinions about changes in student behavior over time but the differing approach to discipline created a more hectic atmosphere at Hillside than Greenfield. This difference was evident in the classroom but had its largest effects at lunch and recess, where students had more space and choice over who they spent time with. The higher amounts of pushing, hitting, and kicking that I observed in the hallway and cafeteria of Hillside Elementary likely demonstrated to students the difficulty that adults had in controlling their behavior and may have led to a belief that they were unlikely to be punished for other behaviors such as bullying. I will now turn to the schools' programmatic approaches to conflicts and violence.

APPROACHES TO BULLYING

Beyond school climate, a major difference between the two schools was the presence of a peer mediation program at Hillside Elementary in the three years preceding my observations. The implementation of this program, called Project PEACE, was the result of a grant through the state Bar Association. As the program's website states:

Project PEACE is a peer mediation program that strives to reduce conflicts and violence in schools by teaching children how to discuss and mediate their disagreements. The objective of Project PEACE is to neutralize minor conflicts before they become explosive confrontations which often lead to violent acts. Children become active participants in controlling behavior in their schools by taking the role of mediator.

Mrs. Knight believed that the program was a success, describing how students responded to problems with peers during its implementation, arguing, "Last year, I think even if it

was a situation where they weren't on the playground and they didn't have the clipboards to get the peer mediator to talk through it. They were kind of doing it anyway. You know, they were kind of forgiving each other. Talking through it and saying, well you know, all the things they had been taught, you know." Despite Knight's positive assessment of the program, Mr. Hanson was less sure of its success, stating, "The bottom line I think is that the teachers and the staff, the principals are responsible for taking care of problems like that. Uh, if other students can help and so forth, you know, that's okay but I'm not really sure how, how successful or how unsuccessful that was, I really don't know." It is important to note that as principal, Knight likely had a better vantage point on the program's success or failure because she is responsible for handling the conflicts that arise on the playground and in the cafeteria. While the program, and the presence of the Home-School Advisor who ran it, had ended by the time I entered the school, Mrs. Knight expressed hope that the students had learned from the experience and developed coping mechanisms as a result.

While only Hillside Elementary had a peer mediation program, the entire school district was involved in the Connected Learning Assures Successful Students (C.L.A.S.S.) program. According to its web site (indianaclass.com), C.L.A.S.S. exists to:

- Translate brain research into practical classroom application
- Provide research-based techniques that drive successful learning
- Prepare current and future educators to become exemplary practitioners, and
- Create a philosophical foundation in the school community that empowers the growth of students in becoming productive contributors in society

These goals are divided into three strands: Climate, Community, and Curriculum. In her interview, Mrs. White described how the district came to adopt the C.L.A.S.S. program:

It really came about because the state was saying that if there's a time that you might lose your accreditation because of low test scores or something, you need a reform model in place so when we fill out paperwork, you've got to check a box, what are you doing... That's how it came about. The state was saying you have to have something in place. Well, C.L.A.S.S. costs a lot of money but [the school district] was in a grant ... and that's what got that all going about seven years ago.

At Hillside and Greenfield Elementary, C.L.A.S.S. was implemented to various extents. Its most prominent implementation was through the Life Skills meetings at Hillside and through the morning routine at Greenfield. Fifth grade students at Greenfield were required to record their assignments in agendas, which were part of the Climate strand of C.L.A.S.S., and have their parents sign their agendas each night. The "Life Goals" were also repeated on the daily morning announcements. After Mr. White was finished with his announcements a different group of students each day would say, "Don't forget the Life Goals. Do the right thing, treat people right" and then recite the Pledge of Allegiance. There were also signs placed in some of the classrooms at both schools repeating the Life Goals and various Life Skills, such as patience and caring. When discussing student difficulties during her Life Skills meetings at Hillside, Mrs. Knight asked students which Life Skills they had used in a particular circumstance.

The C.L.A.S.S. program is designed to be implemented in multiple ways, allowing schools and teachers to choose how many aspects of the program they want to use. Mrs. Knight discussed her current efforts to pull back in some of the areas, stating:

I want to believe that all of the life skills even though we may not have hit them as much this year as we have in the past. Because it gets a bit monotonous, if you're always playing the initiative song and the caring song and we have songs and sheets that go home to the parents and they

write what the kid did to show caring. So, instead of hitting everybody really hard with all that, I just try to hit it a little bit different ways every year. So it's taken more seriously and no one's rolling their eyes at it. But I wanna believe that because of that initiative, you know, we are trying to do our personal best. No put downs, treat others right, do the right thing.

Knight's reasoning for varying the delivery of the C.L.A.S.S. program were sound. At Greenfield Elementary where the Life Goals were repeated every morning, teachers occasionally used their wording in attempts to correct minor behavioral problems. For example, if two students were talking during class Mrs. Adrian sometimes asked, "Are you doing the right thing?" These attempts did not appear to be any more successful than other statements during my observations. When asked if there was anything else I should know, Mrs. Lane highlighted the difficulty of convincing students to buy in to messages such as these. She said, "they're hearing it all the time. Whether or not they, you know, do what they're supposed to do and treat people the way they're supposed to, it's not that they haven't heard it."

Adult Definitions of Bullying

Between C.L.A.S.S. and Hillside Elementary's peer mediation program, both schools had made attempts to improve student interactions, but these programs also affected the thinking of adults. One person who learned from the peer mediation program at Hillside was Mr. Erickson, one of four adults who noted that their conceptions of bullying have been broadened in recent years. As Erickson notes,

I guess I was kind of like a lot of people. I thought at first it was more physical, you know, kids pushing me or knock me down on purpose or those type of things. I think that's our first thought of bullying. Big kid on the playground type thing. Of course through the training that we've had, it's kind of giving me a new feeling on that. It could be a verbal bullying, you know, it could be something they say or don't say, the way they look at you. I really see now that it is more of a broader aspect, broader range of things.

At Greenfield Elementary, Mrs. Lane also noted broadening her definition of bullying, explaining, “To me if, if they’re doin’ things like that I would call that a bully. Now used to I wouldn’t, but I’ve seen so many girls, you know, gangin’ up on, you know, it’s, to me that’s bullying.” In line with this statement, Mr. White discussed encouraging students to associate their actions with bullying, stating “I point out to them that, you know, bullying isn’t just physical. If you say unkind things and make a person feel bad, you know, that hurts just as much as, you know, a physical punch or a kick.”

Echoing this expanded view, each of the teachers, principals, and staff members interviewed included both physical and emotional actions in their definitions of bullying. Emotional actions included exclusion, “picking on” people by calling them names, and bothering people repeatedly, whether alone or in groups. At Greenfield, Mrs. Hunter noted, “I don’t think it has to involve fighting or anything like that but if they would go and pick on a child, put him down because of his clothes or make remarks to him or about that or the way he, he looked or the way he talked or whatever. To me that’s bullying.” Mrs. Adrian took this statement one step farther, arguing that “words are harder, sometimes, than physical harm.” Mr. Hanson at Hillside, who reported being bullied in high school himself, agreed with this assertion but added the caveat that “a bully I guess would be someone who continues to do something that would bother a student, it’s not just a one-time thing, but they continue to do it, like day after day or week after week... I don’t term bullying as something that somebody just gets mad, flies off the handle, pushes somebody and that’s that.” Obviously, Hanson is not condoning the latter, but draws a distinction between unrelated occurrences and the type of regular torment that he experienced as an adolescent. Mrs. Knight supported Hanson’s argument

that the intensity of these behaviors matters in categorizing them, adding “I think if you’ve got a pain in your stomach because you’re fearful, that’s a bully.”

Regarding student motives for inflicting physical or emotional harm, adults at both schools drew connections to the potential power that bullies wield over their victims. This is important because, as we saw in Chapter Three, some students rationalized behavior that took advantage of unequal power differentials due to age. As Mrs. Hunter notes, “that’s kind of the way brothers and sisters are at home. I don’t think it should carry over to school. I don’t think the fifth graders should be mean to a first grader or a kindergarten kid just because somebody in fifth grade was mean to him. I don’t think that should go on at all.” Mrs. Scott reflects:

You know, they’ve always said, big bully. That’s always been a statement just because you’re trying to overpower somebody else. I think that there are people that we may call it, manipulating people. That’s the softer word for bully. I think bully is more, they think bully is more of a guy word and manipulating is a female word for bullying. Bullying almost sounds meaner, like they’re going to do something. Manipulating may be more with the mind, bullying is more physical.

White extends this line of reasoning to adults, stating, “I would say that we probably have parents who try to bully teachers. Uh, you know, try to get them to do something that they really don’t feel comfortable doing.” He completes the connection between bullying and power by drawing connections to the use of power in another setting, arguing “if you consider bullying being unkind to others and making people feel uncomfortable and trying to get them to do something they don’t want, I would say there isn’t much difference between, I’d say probably all discipline reverts back to bullying.” While White was the only adult who connected discipline to bullying, it is interesting in

that both depend on an imbalance of power for success, even if discipline is sanctioned by formalized rules for behavior.

DISTINGUISHING BULLYING FROM NON-BULLYING

While many adults would not consider discipline to be a form of bullying, there are a number of other behaviors that teachers did consider to be bullying. Like their students, these adults argued that intentions matter in determining whether or not an action is bullying. As Mr. Erickson argues, a bully “picking on kids just for no reason” is distinct from “buddies getting into a shoving match or pushing each other during a basketball game.” In this vein, Mrs. Wheeler states that she does not consider actions between friends that are defined “in a fun way” to be bullying. Although this is in contrast to Mrs. Neely’s statement above that name calling is bullying even when between friends, it is a sentiment shared by Mrs. Hunter, who believes that “mild teasing” does not constitute bullying. Expanding on this thought, she states “They do it all the time. They’ll make just general remarks to ‘em and if the other kid kinda laughs and goes along with ‘em and everything I don’t think you could call that bullying.”

Obviously, a situation in which one student teases another student can result in a variety of outcomes depending on the relationship between the students involved. Thus, teachers were aware that not all teasing is created equal. Teachers were also aware that students might try to pass off hurtful behavior as “joking” or “just playing.” While paying attention to intentions, then, for most teachers the focus was placed squarely on the outcomes of student behavior. As Mr. Hanson states, “Just playing doesn’t get it with me because if you’re bothering something to the point where they’re crying or they’re visibly upset, uh, it doesn’t matter what you call it, just playing or whatever. It’s, it

should not be allowed.” In Hanson’s view, responsibility is placed on the students involved to monitor an interaction and ensure that they do not go too far. This position is in line with George Herbert Mead’s (1934:78) assertion that “The response of one organism to the gesture of another in any given social act is the meaning of that gesture.” If a student does go too far, Hanson argues, the punishment should be no different than for a student who intends to do harm.

Mr. White at Greenfield shared a similar view:

You know, we’ve told them that a lot of times it’s on the playground, uh, they’ll come and they’ll say, “Well we were just playing around.” Well, if playing around created somebody getting injured that should have not taken place. And uh, you know, with our playground rules, we indicate very clearly that if there is an activity that the supervisor deems as being potentially harmful or dangerous, you know, they should not be doing it. So a lot of times, two kids will be getting themselves in an incident and they’ll get together and say, “Hey, let’s just tell them that we were playing around and we’ll get out of this.” So, really, I don’t accept playing around as an excuse.

While a majority of students indicated that they did not consider playing or joking to be bullying, many students also attempted to use assertions that they were “just joking” as an excuse. Unlike students, however, when asked if somebody could participate in a potentially negative interaction without it being bullied, none of the adults cited retaliation as a reasonable excuse for behavior. Compared to the discussion of student definitions of bullying in Chapter Three, then, the adults in these schools appear to typically focus more on the outcomes of interactions than the reasons behind them.

NOUN-CENTERED VS. VERB-CENTERED VIEWS

The stereotype of an older, larger student making life difficult for younger students is a part of the cultural milieu in the United States. Indeed, some students used stereotypes such as these to create a noun-centered view of bullies and, simultaneously,

explain why their own behaviors did not fall into these categories. The false dichotomy that Marshall describes in the previous chapter was shared by adults at both schools.

When asked what bullying means to her, Mrs. Wheeler responds:

When I think of bullying I think of Tyson Picken. Um, uh, we have a fourth grader here named Tyson Picken. You've probably seen- the biggest boy there is in four. But I think he, um, in regards to bullying you know, just, he actually you say pushes his weight around, you know? Just says stuff to somebody, uh, has nothing, uh, no reason. Just walks up and says something about 'em or out at recess they'd be playing basketball and a thing, you know, the basketball bounces past them, he just walks right up and either kicks it or takes it and throws it as far as he can throw it. Or picks on 'em in the lunch line, just, or picks their food up and squeezes their orange. I mean, for no reason. It's not his, he shouldn't touch it. You know, just no reason to be doing anything, I mean he's just flat out a bully.

In all, four adults (Mrs. Wheeler and Mrs. Knight at Hillside Elementary and Mrs. Scott and Mrs. Hunter at Greenfield Elementary) expressed noun-centered views of bullying. Expanding on this noun-centered view, Knight states that a student who is currently in high school that she considers a bully is "mean by nature" and was "born that way." Knight notes that students such as this are rare and are typically those who have been labeled emotionally disabled. Presently, she proclaims that there is only one student at Hillside that she considers a bully, explaining:

He bullies the teacher, he bullies all the other kids. No one else can get a word in edgewise. He argues with his teacher. When she's talking he talks over her. He's at his desk, but then when he sees her pick up the telephone he goes back to interrupt. He sees another girl back there so he comes back there and starts talking, knocks her out of the way. I have one bully in my school right now, that I know of. Um, and I really, even as a teacher and being here 19 years, I really can't think of 5 kids that I thought were bullies.

In many ways, these descriptions are reflective of the sort of bullies that are present on TV and in movies. When asked if there are any students that she would label

bullies in the fifth grade, Wheeler states that in addition to Tyson there are “two little bullies” in the second grade but that grade has nothing to do with it, “just individuals.” Similarly, when asked how prevalent bullying is at Greenfield, Mrs. Hunter states that she does not currently see anything that she would label bullying but that in her time at the school there have been “different students” every three or four years that she would label bullies.

While those with noun-centered views of bullying tended to reserve this label for students who fit media stereotypes, those who held verb-centered views of bullying were more liberal in their usage of the term. Mrs. Lane uses media depictions to draw contrasts between outside perceptions and the reality of student life, stating “I don’t see the old-fashioned bullying like what you’d see on *Leave it to Beaver*, you know, where he gets the black eye... it’s more verbal, and it’s subtle.” This is in line with Mr. Erickson’s earlier statement that he has broadened his definition of bullying to include mental and verbal forms of abuse. Rather than attempting to identify patterns of behavior, those with verb-centered definitions stated that bullying could take the form of small actions, even between friends. Mr. White argues, for example, that bullying includes “pressure to do something that they don’t really want to do.”

PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER DIFFERENCES

While Mrs. Neely and Mr. Erickson argued that the behavior of boys and girls is roughly the same, the most common response among adults in the two schools when asked about gender differences was that girls are more likely to use verbal attacks and exclusion and hold grudges longer, while boys are more likely to have physical confrontations but their relationships recover from these confrontations more quickly. As

Mrs. Adrian notes, “Girls, like, argue and fuss and, like, hold it against ‘em forever and boys just usually have it out and then it’s over.” While stating that he does not see much difference in the initial activity of boys and girls, Mr. White argues that “girls tend to drag it out.” In her own classroom, Mrs. Lane states that the boys are more physical but only because the girls are more mature and “don’t wanna look like they’re not cool.”

Revisiting adult definitions of bullying in light of these perceived gender differences in behavior, remember that each of the ten adults interviewed included both verbal and physical actions in their definitions of bullying and many noted that emotional harm can be as great or greater than physical harm. It is possible, then, that while there may be gender differences in student interactions, the punishments are similar for boys and girls, as both types of actions are treated seriously. When asked whether the disciplinary process is different based on whether a student uses verbal or physical attacks, Mrs. Neely supported this view, stating that she typically puts students in time out during recess in both instances. Mrs. Scott also tries to act consistently regardless of the offense, but notes that there are some exceptions, stating that “if someone is physically hurt very badly, of course, you have to report that.”

While Neely and Scott attempt to treat physical and verbal infractions equally, a number of others do not. Mrs. Lane, for instance, notes that she sees a lot of “low-end bullying, you know, which is a lot of it is the girls more than the boys.” At Hillside, Mr. Hanson notes, “there’s kind of a rule, I think, uh, from the principal, I think, you know as far as fighting, physical hitting and so forth. That’s considered more severe.” Mrs. Knight supports Hanson’s contention, reporting that she gives “A lot more suspensions for the physical rather than the verbal,” despite the fact that “You know, you always hear

sticks and stones can break my bones but then someone said, ‘Yeah, but those words can cut deep and they can cut deep forever’ and that’s true. That’s where the true bullying comes in.”

In addition to the harsher punishment a student is likely to receive for physical harm when he or she gets to the principal’s office, students at both schools were more likely to be sent to the office for those behaviors. As Mrs. Adrian notes, students who are inflicting physical harm “usually go straight to the office.” On the playground or in the cafeteria, Mrs. Wheeler states:

W: I would definitely be, definitely be- I don’t want to say more interested, but, yeah. ((Laughs)) If somebody’s hitting or pushing, yeah, definitely.

I: Um, so I guess what would you do if, if you saw somebody hitting or pushing or that what would your process be then, like if you actually saw?

W: If I actually see fighting I will ask ‘em about it but then march ‘em right to the office. I don’t want any fightin’ goin’ on.

This discrepancy exists despite assertions such as Mrs. White’s above that words that have lasting effects are true bullying and statements by teachers such as Mr. Erickson that “name calling can be just as harmful, mentally, to them.” Mr. White provides insight into the reasons behind this discrepancy, arguing, “if it’s some kind of physical thing, uh, the odds of someone else seeing it are much better.” Compared to the difficulty associated with determining one student’s intentions and another student’s interpretation, then, physical confrontations are much easier for adults to detect and make sense of. As a result, efforts to recognize verbal abuse as bullying appear unlikely to result in equal detection and punishment of these behaviors. Further, if boys are more likely to engage in physical behavior as most of the adults assert, the ease of detecting these actions will

result in disproportionate levels of punishment for boys, despite the fact that the actions of girls may result in more long-term harm.

DISCUSSION

It is inherently difficult to draw conclusions about the effects of a school's structure and policies because each cohort of students is different. Nevertheless, the cultural differences between Hillside and Greenfield Elementary appear to influence the behavior of students at each school beyond cohorts. My own perception that teachers at Hillside were not as strict as those at Greenfield was shared by Mrs. Hunter and Mrs. Lane at Greenfield. One of the most important differences between the schools may have been the simple efforts at Greenfield to minimize cohort effects in class assignments by separating students who may cause discipline problems or simply serve as distractions to each other. While Mrs. Knight at Hillside did not have the luxury of creating additional fifth grade classrooms, she also allowed students to remain together by soliciting parental requests for teachers, which may have contributed to the increased effects of popularity and the presence of cliques that I noted at Hillside. In contrast, White notes that parental requests at Greenfield due to friendships were "kind of a low priority" and potentially a reason for students not to share a classroom. Because fifth graders at Hillside ate lunch alone there was also less of an opportunity to mingle with students from other classes or grades, resulting in students who sat at roughly the same tables every day in contrast to the continual differences in seating arrangements at Greenfield.

Partially because of these efforts at Greenfield Elementary, Mrs. Lane notes that her class was "one of the better groups," a statement with which others agreed. In contrast, there was a disagreement between teachers and others at Hillside elementary

concerning the fifth grade students. While Hanson notes that his was “a pretty good class,” the aides and principal argue that their behavior is worse than that of typical students and, according to Mrs. Neely, “pretty much out of control.” Any negative effects of allowing students to remain together over the course of a number of years were likely exacerbated by the differing approaches to discipline of Hanson and Mr. Erickson compared to that of Neely and Mrs. Wheeler. The principals of the two schools also had differing approaches. By simply placing another adult in the setting, Mr. White’s daily presence on the playground and in the cafeteria likely prevented some of the behavior problems that Mrs. Knight lamented having to deal with in describing why she limited the amount of recess time available to fourth and fifth graders.

CONCLUSION

Despite the disciplinary differences between the schools, there were no clearly defined differences in the way these adults defined and interpreted bullying. Although they were less likely to highlight media depictions, general definitions of bullying among the teachers were similar to those of students, including both physical and emotional harm. In contrast to students, however, adults focused more on outcomes when determining what is and is not bullying. This included actions between friends and mild teasing “if the other kid kinda laughs and goes along with ‘em,” according to Hunter. By focusing on outcomes, teachers appear to avoid some of the tricky definitional issues related to an actor’s intentions – if a student caused physical or emotional harm to another student, the action was considered bullying regardless of intent. This placed the onus on students to recognize who was willing to joke around and who was not, although

Knight expressed a belief that students sometimes make too big a deal of things and need to “jump hurdles” in order to deal with what she perceived to be relatively minor slights.

Even when behavior was labeled bullying, potentially harmful physical and emotional actions were not treated equally. As the teachers, principals, and staff members noted, students committing physical acts against a peer were much more likely to be sent to the principal’s office and, once there, more likely to receive a harsh punishment. While all included emotional attacks in their definitions of bullying and many noted that they could do just as much harm as physical attacks, if not more, the reason for this discrepancy can be found in the focus on outcomes. The outcomes of physical harm were simply easier for adults to detect and act upon than those of emotional harm. This discrepancy, then, likely contributes to gendered notions that the behavior of boys is worse than that of girls because the behavior that adults claimed was more typical of boys is also the behavior that is more likely to result in punishment, while the serious emotional harm that girls are more likely to endure goes undetected and unpunished. Further ramifications of this focus on outcomes and the corresponding reliance on student reports of behavior are explored in Chapter Five.

Comparing student behavior at Hillside and Greenfield Elementary, it is tempting to conclude that Greenfield’s discipline policy was more effective due to the consistently higher standards for student behavior. The fact that adults at Greenfield were typically “on the same page” created an environment in which students knew what was expected of them from one situation to another. In contrast, the varying expectations throughout the day at Hillside placed an increased burden on those such as Mrs. Neely and Mrs. Wheeler who attempted to enforce higher standards than the fifth grade teachers. It is possible,

however, that the strict rules at Greenfield did not encourage students to develop their own effective problem-solving skills and that the student environment at Hillside Elementary may better prepare students for entering settings such as middle school cafeterias where the number of students make it more difficult for adults to enforce rules.

While the more consistent enforcement of rules at Greenfield Elementary appeared to be more effective at controlling student behavior, adults at both schools witnessed only a small proportion of student interactions firsthand. In general, they relied upon student reports of rule violations and, in the case of serious violations, worked as “detectives,” interviewing a number of student witnesses in an attempt to determine what had actually occurred. In Chapter Five I explore the strategies that students at both schools used to avoid detection by adults when breaking the rules as well as the processes by which they decided whether or not to tell on other students.

Chapter Five

TAKING CONTROL

In Chapter Three, I examined how some students demonstrate agency in the face of a changing educational climate by defining bullying in ways that do not include their own interactions with peers. In Chapter Four, teachers, principals, and recess supervisors discussed the ways that they attempt to control problematic behavior and the differing amounts of freedom that they granted students at each school. While the reports by the adults in the previous chapter may lead one to believe that students at Greenfield Elementary are suffocated under constant supervision while those at Hillside Elementary run wild regardless of the presence of adults, students at both schools employ the same methods to take control of their daily interactions with peers. This chapter examines the ways that students exert control over these interactions, beginning with their surveillance of teachers and recess supervisors. By watching the adults who are tasked with watching *them*, students create a context in which they have a great deal of control over the reporting of rule violations involving bullying and other behaviors. This context is

examined in order to understand why students, as both victims and bystanders, make the choices that they do in response to bullying and other forms of peer misconduct.

STUDENT SURVEILLANCE OF ADULTS

One of the most fundamental ways that students exert control in school is through secondary adjustments (Goffman 1961, Corsaro 1985, 1990, 2003), such as hiding behavior from teachers, that give us insight into the ways students hide bullying from adults. During my field work I saw numerous examples of students doing things that were against the rules. Eating in class was a common occurrence, as was reading a book on one's lap while the rest of the class was reading together from a textbook, which sat open on one's desk. These actions were rarely observed by the teachers and I would have been unlikely to notice them myself if I had not been sitting behind the students. While students were able to exert some control in the classroom with hidden behavior, their control was greatest on the playground and in other areas where supervision was more difficult. Students overwhelmingly reported that others are the meanest at recess, with a smaller group asserting that others are meanest on the bus rides to and from school. In both locations, students argued, mean behavior was increased by the lack of supervision. Marshall noted that in other places, teachers are "always watching you. At recess, they have to watch everybody." Similarly, Maggie argued that when teachers aren't looking, other students "feel like they can do whatever, and get away with it."

Students typically used careful observation of adults to hide their actions from teachers and other supervisors, sometimes employing the use of actual hiding places. Abigail noted that students would go "behind where all the trees are" to avoid getting caught at Hillside, while Jill stated that students at Greenfield "usually try to play behind

[the big jungle gym] so that teachers don't see them." Students also recognized that teachers and other supervisors were not the only threats, noting that they also needed to, as Jody put it, "make sure that the tattler tales aren't around." (Opinions on tattler tales will be explored later in this chapter.)

Ensuring that their actions were out of the sight of supervisors sometimes necessitated the use of a lookout. Ted and Brian noted that they sometimes employed the use of a lookout in the classroom and bathroom at Hillside, where actions could be hidden under a table or through a doorway but the teacher remained in close proximity. This technique was also employed on the playground at Greenfield so that students could do things like climb up the slides. Christy notes that when doing this, "They just watch. They have, like, a person watch for the teacher." Jason, also a student at Greenfield, noted that while these techniques were often successful, they could also lead to a lack of precaution in the future, arguing that "if they don't get caught the first time, then, like, they'll get in the habit of doing' it, then they get caught."

Like the practice of sneaking candy or reading the wrong book in the classroom, many of the hidden activities discussed above were technically against the rules but were seen by students as relatively harmless. Ted and Brian reported talking under a table out of the teacher's view when they were supposed to be doing group work and bouncing a rubber ball off the walls of the bathroom. Similarly, actions such as climbing up the slide or standing up on the swings at Greenfield were against the rules but resulted in limited punishment (typically spending a portion of recess in "time out") if a student was caught.

Some of the same surveillance techniques that were used to hide these comparatively small offenses, though, were used when students pushed, kicked, or called

other students names at a distance that prevented teachers and others from seeing or hearing. As Brittney notes, at lunch one day “Joel was being very retarded. And so Sandy had this, um, fan thing, and while [the supervisor] wasn’t looking I, uh, took the fan thing and I smacked him with it.” This action was similar to the previous example of standing up on the swings in that students in both cases were aware of the location and supervisors and the direction of their gaze. It is important to note, however, that I never observed physical or verbal abuse taking place while a student lookout stood guard. While these behaviors are possible, the vast majority of physical and verbal attacks that I observed did not appear to be premeditated.

While actions such as Brittney describes were possible in the classroom or the cafeteria, they were also risky because of the small space. A teacher who was looking away at one moment could easily be looking in the direction of an interaction such as this by the time it took place. Because of the large amount of available space on the playground, however, a supervisor may have her back to students. Student interactions in this context were much less likely to be observed simply because of the amount of time required for a supervisor to turn completely around. The fact that recess supervisors sometimes stood and talked with each other also helped students avoid detection because they could monitor both supervisors simultaneously.

REACTING TO POTENTIALLY NEGATIVE BEHAVIOR

The available space on the playground, combined with the control that students exerted over hiding their actions, meant that supervisors rarely witnessed incidents between students. Because of this, the initial responses of students to potentially negative interactions were particularly important in determining the future course of the

interactions. This temporal aspect of student reactions is in line with the interpretive approach discussed in Chapter One. As discussed below, students typically responded differently based on the perceived intentions behind a behavior and whether the behavior was physical or verbal. Students also revealed the complex justifications for ignoring behaviors and deciding to tell on others.

In interactions with other students, the perceived intentions behind an action were important for determining one's reaction. As Jerry notes, "I never really got mad at anybody when I *knew* they were joking around. Now, if I didn't know they were joking around I probably would." Jim states that he gives his friends the benefit of the doubt, arguing "if they're your friends and kinda know it might be jokin' around but if they're not, they're just total strangers, then you kinda know that they're probably bein' mean." Joking in itself was not enough to prevent problems, however. The majority of students noted making a joke that caused somebody else to get mad or getting mad even though they thought somebody was joking around. Joel recalled a situation in which others were "talking nasty stuff" about his sister and getting mad because, even though they were joking, "they shouldn't talk about that stuff."

An additional factor in a student's initial response to negative behavior is the identity of the attacker and his or her relationship to the target. A number of students reported that they are less likely to tell the teacher when their friends say or do something to them than when others do so. While Joel may have been angry in the paragraph above, because those who were talking about his sister were his friends he was unlikely to tell the teacher about this interaction. Similarly, Phil notes that there is a "big difference" in how he reacts because "if they're my friends, they have to get me really, really angry,

like furious [before he would tell the teacher], but if they're not my friends, it just takes a little, just very little to get me to tell on them." Phil's statement demonstrates that beyond reacting differently, students sometimes hold their close friends to different standards of behavior. Caroline echoes this sentiment, noting "if it was my friend and they were meaning it, picking on me, then I would be more upset than somebody I didn't know that well."

Deciding Whether or Not to Tell

In general, roughly a quarter of students reported that their initial response upon interpreting an interaction as negative would be to tell a teacher or other supervisor. Students recognized, however, that telling a teacher was not always an effective way of solving problems. Jerry notes that teachers are sometimes "in the middle of somethin'," preventing them from turning their attention to a student's interpersonal issues. Because of this, many students who initially reported behaviors to a teacher reported using other tactics if the teacher did not resolve the problem. Jerry argues that "If the teacher didn't solve the problem, I'd just try to avoid the person." Joel noted that even when the principal takes action, problems will not necessarily be solved, arguing that in response to physical violence, "she'll call the parents and then the parents don't really care," while he would prefer a suspension in order to send a stronger message.

Some parents appear to support the preferred channels for dealing with problems while recognizing that those options may fail. John's parents exemplify this. He states, "my parents say if they, if someone's being mean to you and they're like punching at you, you tell the teacher first and if they don't do anything about it, if they're doing it again, then you gotta defend yourself." Jason reports a similar message, noting, "my dad

said the first thing to do if they hit you a bunch, tell the teacher. And if they keep doin' it, beat 'em up. Well, not beat 'em up, but hit them back." Both John and Jason note that telling the teacher may stop a single physical attack while not necessarily preventing future attacks.

While John and Jason report being urged by parents to tell teachers as a first response, other students take the opposite approach. After witnessing another student steal money from her friend Tracie on the bus, Maggie notes, "I told her and she went up to the kid. She goes, 'did you take my money?' and he finally goes, 'yes,' and he gave her the money back." They could have told a teacher if the other student had not returned the money, but Maggie argues that, for her, "teachers are a last resort." The ability of students to resolve an issue themselves also underlies Hank's reasoning for not telling after getting into a fight with Tim:

I kept it to me and Tim kept it to him, cause if [Tim's stepdad] woulda heard about it, Tim woulda been black and blue the next morning probably, and I would've too. Well, the next week he probably woulda been black and blue too and so would've I. My stepdad, he has a paddle, and whenever I do something really bad, he'll get me with it really bad. Or else, he'll have me do over fifty pushups sometimes.

Because they were able to put aside their differences afterward, bringing an authority figure into the situation would have caused more problems for each (in the form of punishment at school and at home) despite the fact that the conflict had ended.

Demonstrations of Strength

In the face of potential punishment at school and at home, it may not be surprising that a number of students attempt to solve problems themselves. What may be surprising, however, is that just as many students reported that they would choose to ignore a negative interaction as would tell a teacher or supervisor. Some students believe that by

allowing others to see they are hurt or offended, they are revealing a weakness. As Kaci notes, if somebody was mean to her:

K: I wouldn't let it bother me. Because I would, I could feel hurt inside if I wan- if it hurt me that bad, but I wouldn't show it. I wouldn't be like, ((makes crying noises)) "*That. Was. So. Mean.*" I'd be like, "Suuure."

I: So why would you, like, if you were hurt by something somebody said, like what would be, I guess, an advantage to not showing, like, why would you not want to let them know, I guess that you-

K: Because that shows weakness and that's just what, then people are going to do it more and more. Like a bully, if you show that you're really scared of it, like then they'll keep doing it and doing it and doing it and it just won't stop. But if you let it not bother you, I guess they'll think, like, "Hey, they're not going to listen to anything I say, so I should just stop."

Kaci's statements demonstrate that she recognizes the contextual aspects of bullying and is in line with the interpretive concept of "time work," which is defined as "one's effort to promote or suppress a particular temporal experience" (Flaherty 2003). In this case, Kaci describes seeking to prevent future negative interactions by controlling her present reactions. While most students did not specifically mention a desire not to show weakness, this sort of time work seemed to lie beneath the fact that roughly a quarter of students argued they would attempt to ignore somebody who was being mean to them. Just as students reported that telling a teacher may be the first, but not the only, response, many noted that ignoring others was not always effective and discussed secondary strategies. For example, Jim states, "if it got to a point where they're not stopping, then I would probably go tell at teacher."

While ignoring a verbal attack was seen as a sign of strength, some students felt that a different sign was necessary in response to a physical attack. As Jason notes:

If they like hit me in the shoulder and just kept hittin' me and bullyin' me around, I'd probably like hit 'em back and make 'em stop hittin' me. Like, I'd probably hit 'em a bunch, not a bunch, but like, I'd hit them in the shoulders. Prove to 'em that-that I can. Like, "stop bullyin' me around." But if it was something, just someone called me like, "retard," like, "your mom's stupid," I wouldn't do anything. I would just ignore 'em.

For Jason, like Kaci above, it is important not to show weakness. While ignoring a verbal attack demonstrates that a student is emotionally strong, ignoring a physical attack sends the opposite message.

Students sometimes see retaliation to verbal attacks as necessary as well, but the attacks have to go beyond the common statements that Jason notes, such as the "nasty stuff" that students were saying about Joel's sister above. Chad is in an interesting position to comment on this because he had hospitalized earlier in the school year and, when he returned, reported that another student had told him he wished he had died. Chad argues that in response to "really mean" negative behavior he would probably "start making jokes about them" with his friends. He and his friends might then "kind of like cast them out... or if they wanted to like hang out, we'd be like, 'no,' or just ignore them." Chad's relatively high social status allowed him to use the power of his friendships to retaliate through verbal attacks from the group as well as exclusion from the group.

Counting on Other Students for Support

While Chad was a member of the popular group of students at Hillside Elementary, seeking refuge with friends was an important tactic for students from all social statuses when ignoring an attack was not sufficient. Chelsie, one of the popular girls at Hillside, notes that her friends' responses depend on the attacker, stating "if

they're, like, one of my friends, they'd be like, 'oh my, okay, I'll go talk to her then' and then if they're not our friends she just be like, 'oh well.'" For this group of friends, then, ignoring a behavior was only a suitable response if it did not threaten within-group relationships.

While Chelsie's describes seeking a friend out in the example above, bystanders also intervened on behalf of their peers. In the following example, we see three students attempt to intervene on Monica's behalf.

When it was time for social studies Kathy's book was missing. Because of this Mr. Erickson told her to sit by somebody and read their book with them and Kathy chose to sit in the aisle between Monica and Felicity's desks. For almost the entire time that the class was reading out of the social studies book Kathy was bothering Monica. First, she had her water bottle in her mouth and was pressing the bottom end against Monica's arm, then she made a face at Monica, then she went back to pushing Monica with the water bottle, this time while holding it in her hands. I couldn't see Monica's face but she did not say anything while this was going on, she just put up with it and tried to ignore it. At one point Kathy went out in the hall to get a drink and Monica and Felicity tried to move their desks and push the chair that Kathy was sitting in back so that when she returned she wouldn't be so close but when Kathy came back she just pulled the chair up next to Monica's desk again. Throughout this time Ben seemed like he was irritated by Kathy's actions and Jared kept telling Kathy to stop when she was pushing Monica or to "shut up" when she was talking. Finally, Ben and Brad approached Mr. Erickson and told him what Kathy was doing to Monica. Mr. Erickson told Kathy that she needed to leave Monica alone and she relented (Fieldnote, 01/29/08).

Although she does not directly confront Kathy in the excerpt above, Monica makes it clear that she is bothered by Kathy when she attempts to move her desk away from Kathy's chair. Throughout this interaction, Jared tried and failed to verbally curb Kathy's behavior against Monica. After his efforts failed to resolve the situation, Ben and Brad approached Mr. Erickson, who was able to stop Kathy's behavior.

In other cases, classmates intervened in attempts to prevent interactions from breaking down. During a game of four square, for example, Kevin argued that he was not “out” although almost everybody else asserted that he was. One of the students told him that he was wasting recess time and he eventually agreed to leave the game (Fieldnote, 03/07/08). Similarly, on the basketball court:

Jill and Jeremy both had their hands on the basketball and were trying to get control of it when Jill’s shoulder hit Jeremy’s face and his glasses started to come off. Christy told them to stop and they stood still (both still holding the ball) while we both reached for Jeremy’s glasses before they fell on the ground. I picked them up off of Jill’s shoulder and they resumed their struggle for a few seconds until Jill successfully pulled the ball away from Jeremy. He asked, “Who has my glasses?” and I handed them to him. He said “Thanks” (Fieldnote, 12/20/07).

Although Jill and Jeremy were struggling with each other for control of the basketball, neither were willing to risk the trouble likely associated with a broken pair of glasses and Christy intervened in order to prevent damage from occurring. After I had picked up the glasses and the danger had passed, their interaction resumed, just as the game of four square resumed after Kevin accepted that he was out.

In situations such as those described in the preceding paragraphs it is relatively easy to identify the actions that students take to maintain or restore smooth interactions. It is harder, however, to observe interactions in which students use subtle behaviors to prevent larger problems. Still, there are some examples in my fieldnotes of students using tactics such as humor to prevent problematic interactions. For example, “While playing soccer in the gym Kathy got really close to the player with the ball. Ken said ‘Kathy, get off him, this isn’t basketball!’ and some of the students laughed” (Fieldnote, 03/11/08). Kathy frequently guarded players closely in basketball and contested their possession of the ball as Jill and Jeremy do in the preceding paragraph. In basketball, this

sometimes lead to delays as Kathy and another player struggled for the ball while the other students waited for the situation to be resolved. Recognizing this, Ken's joke let Kathy know that her behavior was inappropriate for the game of soccer and may have prevented retaliation from the player who was attempting to control the ball in the face of Kathy's defensive pressure.

As evident in the earlier example of Kathy bothering Monica, peers were also important for reporting negative behaviors to teachers and other supervisors. Kerri, in the middle of the social standings at Hillside, noted that if somebody was mean to her, "I'd either ignore it if it wasn't too bad and if it was really bad I'd either tell the teacher or some-, one of my friends, and they could tell someone." Bobby, who was near the bottom of the social standings at Hillside reports that his friends might support him in a number of ways. He notes, "they'd just probably say tell on 'em, 'n, and stuff like that and they would probably tell for you or for me." Bobby argues that he sometimes doesn't want to tell teachers about negative behaviors because he doesn't "really want to get the kids in real big trouble," but notes that his friends will sometimes push him to tell on those who have been mean to him and, in other cases, actually tell the teacher on his behalf.

BYSTANDER REACTIONS

When students consider whether or not to report bullying, they are faced with the knowledge that their behaviors may have an impact on future interactions. It is sometimes impossible in a small school to avoid students who engage in bullying. Because of this, the control that students exert is limited by their anticipation of future interactions. Although researchers have studied the various roles that bystanders take on

(O'Connell et al. 1999; Sullivan et al. 2004), previous research has not explained what motivates these students to take on a given role over another.

Just as the students discussed above describe complex reasons for deciding whether to tell on somebody for being mean to them, bystanders face a similarly complex decision. In discussing bystanders it is important to note that they may observe an interaction from near or far and that their reactions often differ based on this distance. Like those involved in a bullying encounter, the responses of bystanders who are close by may affect future interactions with the students who initiated the encounter. These bystanders may be accused of telling if the “bullies” get in trouble or they may be reprimanded by friends for not taking action to assist a friend in need. Students who observe an interaction from farther away, however, are less likely to face consequences from those involved for either telling a teacher or ignoring a situation because they are less likely to be seen observing the interaction by those involved. This gives bystanders who observe an interaction from afar a greater amount of control over their responses.

General Decisions Regarding Whether or Not to Tell

Among students at both schools there was a general consensus that it is often not necessary to tell on others for breaking what are perceived as small or unimportant rules. In fact, nearly all of the students that I interviewed reported times when they had seen somebody breaking the rules and decided not to tell a teacher or other supervisor. In deciding whether or not to tell, some students differentiated between “big” and “small” rules. Maggie notes that, at Greenfield Elementary, bringing a cell phone to school is a “really big rule” that has been emphasized by the teachers and principal and contrasts this with eating on the bus, which “isn’t too, too major.” She states, “I’ve told on people for

having a cell phone before. But I never tell on ‘em for, like, the little things, like eating on the bus or anything like that.” Like Maggie, who previously stated her view of teachers as a “last resort,” Marcy also describes a hesitance to go to teachers, stating, “I’ve seen a few people break the rules and I always warn them. I was like, ‘If you’re not careful someone’s going to tell on you one of these days.’ And if they do it again, I’m like, ‘Well, it’s just not the right thing, I need to go tell,’ so then I go tell the teacher and they take care of it.”

While Maggie and Marcy avoid telling teachers because of their preference to handle problems themselves, other bystanders avoid telling teachers because they do not want to get involved. Christy expands on the statements above, noting that if somebody is “breaking rules bad, like, really badly, then I’ll tell on ‘em. Like if somebody pushed somebody down and they got hurt, I’ll tell on ‘em, but if they’re just doing something another way I shouldn’t really get involved because I know I’ll get in trouble for being nosy.” Christy continues to give an example in which she was in the computer lab and somebody was using the wrong program. When she told Mrs. Hunter about the situation, Christy reported that Mrs. Hunter replied, “Why are you being nosy? You’re not supposed to be watching their monitor, you’re supposed to be watching yours!” For Christy, Mrs. Hunter’s assertion that students sometimes need to mind their own business in the computer lab carries over to the Greenfield Elementary playground, where Hunter is a supervisor, reinforcing the belief of students that some rules matter less than others.

Although Christy maintains that she would tell on somebody for physical abuse, the reticence of some students to get involved in the interactions of others does not stop at minor infractions. Sandy, a student at Hillside Elementary, recalls:

S: [The boys in the class] said they were gonna beat up someone. I'm just like, the teacher's gonna know that. If something's going on, the teacher's gonna realize. I'm just like, I really don't want to get in this, because then I would probably have to go to the office and explain to Mrs. Knight and-

I: So if you- if you told on somebody, like, you would have to go and, like, tell every- everything that you had heard or what you knew, and then//

S: //And sometimes I wouldn't know that much, and they would think that I know everything, and I'm just like, "I don't know much."

I: So they would think you had more information than you really// did?

S: //Yeah. And it would be pressure.

Because of the student control over surveillance described above, supervisors at both schools rarely observed verbal or physical abuse on the playground. As a result, they reported having to act like detectives, often interviewing multiple witnesses in order to ascertain what had transpired. Sandy's previous experiences as a witness appear to have led her to avoid telling on others in the future, even for a potentially serious offense. Sandy is in the minority, as physical harm was the most frequently cited reason that students would choose to tell on somebody else. In contrast, most verbal attacks were seen as minor by students, a view that was supported by the punishments that students received for these actions, as discussed in Chapter Four. Sandy demonstrates that some bystanders may avoid telling in order to avoid the perceived negative experience of serving as a witness.

While some bystanders may not want to serve as witnesses, a small number of students who are sometimes in trouble themselves described a sort of golden rule of telling. Jody notes that in deciding whether or not to tell on somebody for breaking the rules she considers whether she has ever broken the same rule. If she has, she tends not

to tell because “I’ve done it, too,” but if she has not, she is more likely to tell. Jason expands on this, stating, “I never tell on kids who break the rules,” because, “if I break the rules, I don’t want someone tellin’ on me. So, like, if they break the rules, why would I want someone tellin’ on them?” Christy is not as reluctant to tell, but tries to “not get them involved with the principal, ‘cause I don’t like doing that to people.” She then revealed that she doesn’t like to put other people in that position because “he scares me.” Each of these students reports avoiding putting other students in situations in which they have found themselves in the past or might find themselves in the future.

Rules as Weapons

The examples in the preceding paragraphs demonstrate students’ dislike for receiving punishment, whether at home or at school, and while some students use this as a reason not to tell, others choose to be more selective by telling on those that they do not like. In Chapter Four I noted that Greenfield’s principal, Mr. White, had implemented a policy that students could not sit by those that they were “going out with” in the cafeteria. This was evident during lunch on my third day in Greenfield, as seen in the following example:

Mr. White approached our table and said that Nate had to move because he heard that Nate and Maggie liked each other. He said that the school didn’t need any boyfriends and girlfriends or people liking each other too much. After this I clarified with Maggie, Tracie, and Scott that people weren’t allowed to sit with those that they “liked.” I also asked how Mr. White found out and Maggie said that it was probably from another girl who didn’t like her. They tried to point her out to me but I wasn’t sure who they were talking about (Fieldnote, 12/14/07).

The situation above demonstrates how easily knowledge about breaking the rules can be used as a weapon against those a student dislikes. As Ted notes, “if I’m mad at someone, I will tell on them.” Students also reported that the opposite was true. Tim states that

whether or not somebody is his friend is his primary criteria for deciding whether or not to tell. Further, he reveals, “me and our friends made up a thing. If we’re friends, we do not tell on each other.” He later reiterated, “True friends do not tell on each other.” In doing so, Tim placed his friends above the school rules. In fact, over half of the students who gave a reason that they would avoid telling on somebody cited friendship. By using different standards when deciding whether to tell on friends versus others, the school rules become a weapon for students to use against those they do not like.

As the above example demonstrates, bystanders frequently use personal relationships when deciding whether or not to tell on another student for breaking school rules, but students also attempt to use the rules as a weapon when *no* rules have been broken. Christy pointed this out during my second week in Greenfield Elementary when I was trying to make sense of a playground interaction, as seen in the following example: “I was standing by the basketball hoop with Christy when I saw Kyle arguing with Jill and then fall down on the ground, looking like he was hurt. I was confused because I didn’t see anything happen to Kyle that could have caused an injury. Jill told me that Kyle sometimes fakes injuries to get other people in trouble” (Fieldnote, 12/20/07).

From Jill’s perspective Kyle had fallen down on the ground in an attempt to get a supervisor’s attention. I came to share this perspective as Kyle continued lying on the ground and Jill and I walked closer but still remained outside of the interaction. From the ground, Kyle told Jill that she wouldn’t like it if someone had stepped on *her* hand. This statement did not make sense because nobody had been close enough to step on Kyle’s hand since he fell on the ground and nobody could have stepped on his hand when he was standing to cause him to fall on the ground. He appeared to be making things up as he

went along, hoping that a supervisor would come near and punish Jill. This effort failed, as no supervisors were in the area, and Kyle eventually got up and resumed normal interactions. Because of the above fieldnote, I included a question in my student interviews about whether or not students ever claim that somebody had broken the rules when they had not and over three quarters of students reported that they believe students do this.

The reasons that students think others do this vary, but the most common responses center on attempts to get others in trouble. Sometimes this is in retaliation for an earlier interaction and sometimes it is simply because one student does not like another student. In effect, these situations are attempts by students to use the rules of the school against others, just as they do when deciding to tell on others for minor infractions such as sitting next to a boyfriend or girlfriend. Students may also attempt to use accusations against others in order to deflect blame from themselves. As Kaci notes, “I’ve heard, ‘he hit me,’ but actually he hit the other person.” This statement was echoed by teachers, principals, and recess supervisors, who noted that Student A may claim Student B hit her, when in reality Student B hit Student A or Student B hit Student A, who then hit Student B in retaliation. Because of this, Kaci notes that Mrs. Knight “does not care who did it first. She’s like, ‘I don’t care whose fault it is or who started it.’” Students were careful to note that, at best, these tactics work only some of the time. In many cases, a student who falsely accuses another may end up in trouble himself. Shawna states that Mr. White is careful to investigate accusations, which can result in those who make up stories getting in trouble.

Defending against the Rules

Because investigations by recess supervisors, teachers, and principals are an important part of the disciplinary procedure, students who are falsely accused are less likely to be punished if they have witnesses to support them. When Marcy has been falsely accused, friends have been nearby to contradict her accuser. She explains, “I’ve always had a friend that’s with me at the same that that happened ... and if someone that just apparently just doesn’t like me, just says, ‘she did this,’ and then I’ve got these guys that are like, ‘help, what did I do?’ And then they’re all like, ‘Well, she didn’t do that. She was with us playing basketball or she was talking to us.’” Marci also cautions, however, that friends can face pressure to provide alibis for those who *are* guilty. She notes, “But most of the time, it’s really hard ‘cause if you really have done that, you can’t go trusting friends to get you out of it because then they’d be doing something wrong. So you’ve got to confess it. I’ve never been in that situation but I know somebody who has been and they’ve tried to get me to help them. I was like, ‘I can’t help you.’”

Marci is, perhaps, a rare example of a student who will not lie to protect a friend from punishment, but it is not hard to imagine that a large number of students will, increasing the difficulty of supervisors’ disciplinary decisions. Possibly because of this, some students argue that supervisors will punish students who are wrongly accused just in case, while others argue that supervisors will not believe the accuser when they did not witness the behavior personally. The reality likely lies somewhere in between, as some students suggest that reputations play a large role in these situations. Along these lines, Jerry argues “if the person has been pretty much good all year or good part of the year, the teacher will probably know” that he or she is innocent. Abigail argues that the

importance of one's reputation also extends to witnesses, with teachers placing their trust in statements by students who don't "do bad things."

Importantly, students are aware of others' reputations and can use this to their advantage. Jerry notes that one's reputation is important in getting another student in trouble because "some of the good students who don't like some of the bad students would go and say something that a bad student didn't do and they- and since the good student hadn't gotten in trouble, the bad student would get in trouble." Students with bad reputations, then, may be accused more frequently than those with good reputations. Sandy argues, Mike "sorta has, not a bad reputation, but people know that he can get in trouble really easy. And so, if something comes up, then they're just like, 'Mike did it.'" Brian, one of the group that Ted describes as the "fun bullies" in Chapter Three, has been wrongly accused, stating, "I know I've got told on for throwing a ball and I didn't throw it, and it hit somebody."

Student comments about the importance of one's reputation in the success of a false accusation are strongly supported by the comments of teachers, principals, and recess supervisors. Nearly all of the adults that I interviewed reported that student reputations play a role in their disciplinary decisions. As Mrs. Neely explains, "first time offenders, depending on what it is, you are kind of more lenient about things than the people who are repeatedly in trouble. I mean, I'm not one to take recess all the time from somebody, but the repeat offenders, I sometimes, I don't think twice about making them go stand [for time out]." Mr White, the Greenfield principal, reports considering a student's reputation along with "witness accounts." The willingness to use student reputations in disciplinary decisions contributes to the socially constructed nature of

“bullies,” in which bullying becomes associated with individual students rather than with actions. These findings demonstrate the importance of moving away from noun-centered definitions in order to view bullying as part of a complex system of peer relations and student/teacher dynamics.

Tattle Tale: Another Label to Avoid

Whether innocent or not, students clearly use telling on each other as a way of controlling their experiences at school and roughly a quarter of students responded that if somebody was mean to them they would tell an adult, yet some students have a strong negative reaction to the idea of telling on others that goes beyond the aversion to appearing weak and the “golden rule” described above. Students in both schools spoke negatively about “tattle tales” or “tattlers.” Some viewed tattle tales as in the same way that Christy described being nosy. For example, Jim said, “I don’t like bein’ a tattle tale and stuff, and telling on somethin’ that’s not really that big of a deal.” Similarly, Leann defined tattlers as those who see “Little things that are like no problem, not going to be a problem, but you go and tell anyway.” These students disrupt the flow of interactions for both teachers such as Mrs. Hunter, who told Christy to pay attention to her own computer monitor, and students, who need to watch out for tattle tales to avoid being told on for minor violations, as Jody noted near the beginning of the chapter.

Possibly because of their disruptive tendencies, there is a strong desire to avoid being seen as a tattle tale and to avoid those who receive this label. As Jason states, “I hate tattle tales.” Tattling is also strongly associated with children. Chad argues that “nobody ever tells unless you are really little,” while Malcolm states that Hillside Elementary has “hordes of little kids” that “come and tattle,” to the extent that the

principal told students that the recess supervisor does not have time for tattlers. By linking tattling to young children, students effectively rationalize rule breaking, arguing that it should not be reported by older students. This is similar to the way that negative behaviors toward younger students and siblings were rationalized in Chapter Three. While many students see bullying younger children as normative, their smaller size likely reduces the number of options they have for responding effectively in these situations and leads to them to rely more on reporting these incidents to teachers. As a result, telling teachers takes on a negative connotation among older students because of its association with younger students. While the idea that students should not tell on each other for breaking minor rules probably makes daily interactions smoother, problems arise when students are reluctant to report *any* rule violations to teachers or supervisors.

Just as Christy reported that she should not be nosy due to reporting a minor problem, Kaci states that she doesn't like telling in general because "It just feels weird telling on people. If, 'cause, I mean, there are, like, tattle tales. Like, '*Oh my gosh*, you just hit me, I'm going to tell the teacher.' But, of course, if they like actually physically hurted me, I would tell, but I am not really the telling kind of person." Because students are expected by their peers to avoid reporting minor rule violations, the distinction between major and minor violations is important. While physical harm was the most frequently cited reason that students said they *would* tell on somebody, most verbal attacks were seen as minor, even if they were emotionally hurtful.

DISCUSSION

An overriding theme in the examples reported above is the importance of peer support. This was present in reacting to a negative interaction, deciding whether or not to

tell on somebody, and supporting oneself if falsely accused. As Chad noted earlier, he and his peers might make jokes about or disassociate from a verbal attacker. Marcy stated that she would also seek out her friends if somebody was mean to her so that she would have a friend nearby if the attacker returned. For students without large support groups, however, daily life at school may be more difficult. Small groups of two or three friends, while providing each other with support, may not be provide the type of safety in numbers that Chad describes and may, in fact, be verbally or physically attacked together. These students may be more likely to tell than others because being labeled a tattle tale is likely better than the attacks they are trying to avoid in doing so. In contrast, many students saw telling a teacher as only one of a multitude of possible responses, depending on the situation. If students do not have the social support necessary to respond effectively without telling, however, the limited options available suggest that they will be less likely to be able to maintain trouble-free daily interactions.

At Hillside Elementary, one of the possible responses to negative interactions in the years before my observations had been the peer mediation program discussed in Chapter Four. As noted in that chapter, the opinions of adults at Hillside differed on whether the program had been a success, with Mrs. Knight expressing hope that the students had learned from the experience and developed coping mechanisms as a result and Mr. Hanson expressing doubts. While Chelsie reported using the peer mediation program to solve a problem in her group of friends and stated that she is “probably” better at solving problems on her own as a result, many students saw peer mediation as a way of avoiding going to the principal’s office. Kathy, for example, stated that she thought the peer mediation program had effectively given students an out, stating that

students “didn’t have to go see Mrs. Knight.” Without the program, however, she feels that students get along better because, knowing that there is no longer a way to avoid punishment, “they don’t want to have to go to the office.”

While Hillside Elementary’s peer mediation program aimed at mending rifts between students after they occurred, and the “Life Goals” that both schools used during my observations (reminding students to “do the right thing” and “treat people right”) emphasized prevention, neither seemed successful at providing students with strategies for deflecting negative behavior when it occurred. Like the teachers and students who use noun-centered definitions of bullying, it is possible that programs such as peer mediation and the life goals place too much emphasis on the roles that students enact, assuming that a student who internalizes that he or she should do the right thing will do so in all situations. As the examples in this chapter demonstrate, however, what a student perceives to be the “right” response to an interaction is incredibly complex and differs depending on a number of factors.

While there was a great deal of variation in the responses of most students, there were a few students for whom the “noun-centered” approach to behavior appeared to be appropriate, in that their responses were either consistently neutral or consistently reactive. Mark, for example, was a student at Greenfield Elementary who seemed to be above the fray of typical student interactions. During my observations I never saw him get mad at another student and I never saw another student get mad at him. Students did not abuse him physically or verbally and I got the sense that if they had he would have ignored them. Mark was relatively quiet but was on the basketball team and usually

played basketball at recess. This is notable only in that the basketball court was a site of frequent conflicts in which Mark was never involved.

In contrast to Mark, who seemed unfazed by daily life at school, other students appeared to have strong reactions to nearly everything. Mike, who is discussed above as a possible scapegoat for other students at Hillside Elementary, seemed to be constantly involved in verbal or physical disagreements with other students and was frequently sent to the principal's office. It was hard to discern whether other students would say or do things to Mike because they knew he would have a strong reaction or whether Mike perceived slights that others would have overlooked. It seems likely that both factors were at play. It is important to remember that only a few of the students I observed fell into these categories and most students reacted with much greater variation. As a result, I suspect that the "noun-centered" approach to solving negative behavior is relevant to the daily social experiences of very few students.

CONCLUSION

In the face of sometimes strict rules for behavior, students in these schools exert control over their daily lives in a number of ways. On the most basic level, students attempt to control the surveillance of their interactions by hiding their behaviors from those who would disapprove, including both adults and other students. Students also exert control in their initial reactions to a perceived negative interaction, including not taking offense, ignoring a behavior, retaliating, and telling someone who may help. In these reactions, which differ depending on the relationship of the target to an attacker, students must consider the impressions that they give others to avoid appearing weak or unable to defend themselves while, in most cases, trying to avoid physical conflict.

Just as students have control over whether or not they tell on those who they perceive as mean to them, as bystanders they exert control over telling on other students for breaking a variety of school rules. Typically, students attempt to avoid telling on each other for small rule violations so as not to be labeled tattletales. Student definitions of “small” and “large” violations, however, differ beyond a general acceptance that physical violence is serious. The result is that although students identified verbal abuse as a form of bullying in Chapter Three, they, like the adults in Chapter Four, treat it as a less serious offense than physical attacks.

In determining whether or not to tell on another student, individuals also consider whether or not they are friends with rule breakers. Because of this, students are sometimes able to use the school rules as weapons against each other, telling on those they dislike for breaking relatively minor rules. Further, students sometimes tell on those who have done nothing at all with the hope that those they dislike will be punished. Teachers and recess supervisors, then, are sometimes unknowingly complicit in negative interactions between students. Adults attempt to negate these attempts by considering the reputations of the students in question. While this is sometimes effective, it also leaves those with good reputations with more control over their own school experiences as well as those of their friends and enemies. In many of these areas, peer support is important in maintaining control. In general, the amount of offense that one takes to perceived negative interactions appears to influence the frequency of those interactions, as students who seemed to have the most control of their reactions were much less likely to be physically or verbally provoked by their peers than those who seemed to have the least control.

This chapter begins to disentangle the complex connections between peer interaction, school rules, and disciplinary procedures. Because students report both legitimate and illegitimate violations of school rules, teachers often take student reputations into account. In response, students can use those with “bad” reputations as scapegoats for negative behavior. The willingness to use student reputations in disciplinary decisions likely contributes to the development of noun-centered definitions of bullying because teachers draw connections between past behaviors and present evidence to determine punishments. Further, this creates a situation in which a bullied student could come to have a negative reputation in the eyes of teachers through that student’s frequent problems with others, allowing the school rules to become another avenue of attack.

Chapter Six

TOWARD AN INTERPRETIVE SOCIOLOGY OF BULLYING

The study of bullying has been recognized as an important topic by researchers, who have approached it from a number of perspectives. While a number of sociological researchers have made contributions that can be applied to the study of bullying, however, the direct contributions of sociologists, and especially qualitative sociologists, have been relatively rare. A notable example is the work of Goodwin (2006), who examines bullying by a group of girls outside the view of adults. The general lack of sociological research on bullying is surprising given that bullying is an essentially social process. In contrast to psychological studies of bullying that assume individuals are static and seek to identify traits of bullies such as aggressive tendencies, the interpretive approach discussed in Chapter One allows for the examination of the agency, social processes, contextual factors, and interpretations that affect the interactions of students, teachers, staff members, and principals in schools. By applying an interpretive sociological approach to the definition of bullying, secondary adjustments of students, motivations of bystanders, role of friendship, and potential solutions to the problem of

bullying we can see the importance of this work and get a sense of the work that remains if we are to fully develop an interpretive sociology of bullying.

DEFINING BULLYING

In defining bullying, both students and adults listed actions such as verbal abuse, physical abuse, and exclusion that were in line with those cited as bullying by previous researchers (Olweus 1993, Ambert 1995, Sullivan et al. 2004). Rather than stopping with this definition, however, the interpretive approach allows us to see that participants did not define bullying based on actions alone. Beyond the definitions above, both students and adults noted that social context influences their interpretation of a given action. As seen in Chapter Three, students interpret interactions differently based on their relationships with those involved, perceptions of innocence, perceived or stated joking, and age differences. While adults also took the context of interactions into account, Chapter Four reveals that they did not view retaliation or joking as suitable excuses for verbal or physical attacks.

In general, the adults in this study were more likely than students to focus on the outcomes of a behavior than the intentions behind it, placing the meaning of a behavior in the response it received. The standpoint of adults, then, is in line with the perspective of Mead (1934). Adults used this stance to argue that students deserved to be punished for hurting other students regardless of whether they were “just playing.” Students, however, likely had to focus on perceived intentions because their responses to interactions *were* the outcomes. For minor incidents, such as if a student was pushed from behind in the hallway, the identity and intention of the attacker were more important than the act itself. Further, because teachers did not witness all, or even most, rule violations, a student

deciding to report an interaction to a teacher (in the face of potential negative labels as discussed in Chapter Five) based on his or her interpretation of that interaction allowed the teacher to remain focused on outcomes. When behaviors were reported to adults, the adults in this study stated that they were more likely to refer students to the principal for physical than verbal abuse and the principal reported that punishments for students were also greater for physical attacks. These statements work to undermine their own definitions of bullying, in which many of the adults in these schools emphasized that verbal attacks could cause as much, or more, harm as physical attacks. Further, because verbal attacks were less likely to be observed by adults than physical attacks, students were less likely to be detected, referred to the principal, and strongly punished for these behaviors.

Examples such as a student who decides not to report a friend for pushing her but does report somebody that she dislikes for insulting her and a teacher who is less likely to send students to the office for verbal abuse demonstrate that bullies and bullying in schools are socially constructed. While this finding is unlikely to be surprising to sociologists, it may be a surprise that the images associated with the word “bully” in popular culture are likely counterproductive to the construction and maintenance of a school that is free of bullying interactions. A number of the students and adults who participated in this study held what I describe in Chapter Three as *noun-centered* rather than *verb-centered* views of bullying. That is, these individuals thought of bullies as those who were *always* mean. In doing so, students and adults created a false dichotomy between bullies and non-bullies that allowed them to downplay the prevalence of bullying actions in their schools.

These noun-centered definitions lead adults to focus their attention on a few “bullies” while underestimating the seriousness of potentially hurtful actions by other students. For students, this view allowed for definitions of bullying that excluded their own actions, as Marshall demonstrates when he argues that the grades and extracurricular activities of he and his friends separate them from the bullies, who do not care about these sorts of things. As seen in Chapter Three, students sometimes used qualifiers in their discussions of bullying, such as Ted’s assertion that he and his group of friends are “the fun bullies” or Marci’s statement that another student is “not really a bully, bully.” While these qualifiers added context to student definitions, the focus remained on nouns and attempts to label peers “bullies” or “non bullies.” The quantitative surveys of bullying discussed in Chapter One have the opposite problem. By focusing on actions, these surveys use verb-centered definitions of bullying but their lack of context prevents researchers from being able to determine how those actions were interpreted by those involved. Applying the interpretive perspective discussed in Chapter One allows us to see the ways that noun-centered definitions allowed both students and adults to define away bullying as a problem in their schools within the context of continued interactions that fit typical definitions of bullying.

These findings suggest that schools might be better served by focusing less on labels like “bully” and more on particular behaviors that are to be taken seriously by students, teachers, staff members, and principals. For example, rather than defining insults as a form of bullying and then overlooking their use by students who are not defined as bullies, schools could make clear to students which forms of insults will not be tolerated and follow through by punishing students for those actions just as severely as

they would punish students for punching or kicking one another. In this way, schools would prevent students from considering their behavior to be less serious because they are “not bullies.”

SECONDARY ADJUSTMENTS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Whether or not teachers, staff members, and principals regard negative interactions as bullying, it is clear that these adults could not directly observe all of the interactions taking place in a classroom, at lunch, or on the playground. This allowed students at both schools to exert control over adult surveillance through a number of secondary adjustments. Goffman (1961: 189) defines secondary adjustments as “any habitual arrangement by which a member of an organization employs unauthorized means, or obtains unauthorized ends, or both, thus getting around the organization’s assumptions as to what he should do and get and hence what he should be.” Following Goffman, Corsaro (1985, 1990, 2003) applies this definition to examine children’s strategies of gaining and sharing control in recognition of adult rules.

The strategies that I observed among fifth grade students were in line with the strategies of subterfuge and working the system that Corsaro (1990) saw in use among preschool students. As discussed in Chapter Five, the students that I observed attempted to hide their behaviors by observing the locations of supervisors and sometimes employing lookouts. While these behaviors were not always discussed in the context of negative peer interactions, their practice demonstrates that students were aware of the limitations of adult surveillance and attempted to use these limitations to their advantage. In addition to subterfuge, I observed and heard about a number of students working the system of discipline. While the children that Corsaro (1990) describes sought personal

gains by attempting to avoid helping at clean-up time, the fifth graders that I observed attempted to use school rules as weapons against each other. By reporting rule violations by peers that they disliked or who they felt had wronged them in the past, students took further advantage of adults' limited capacities for surveillance. Because adults did not typically witness these interactions themselves, students were able to make claims against others with various degrees of truthfulness. Adults then had to investigate these claims by talking to those near the location of the reported incident, further reducing their ability to observe student behavior.

In addition to adding to our understanding of student behavior in schools, the ability of students to use school rules to their advantage has important implications for programs aimed at the reduction or prevention of bullying. For example, programs that aim to teach students strategies for dealing with negative interactions may encourage victims to diffuse potentially negative situations by making jokes. If all students in a school receive this training, however, they are likely to recognize its use. A student who is the target of verbal or physical abuse and makes a joke, then, may be ridiculed further for using the training that she received and accused of being unable to stand up for herself. For this reason, those who attempt to implement anti-bullying programs must be careful to consider the potential ways they might be used, both for and *against* students.

BYSTANDER MOTIVATIONS

Because adults are unlikely to view a given interaction between students, bystanders have a great deal of control over determining whether rule violations will be supported, ignored, or reported to teachers. Although researchers such as Sullivan et al. (2004) have studied the various roles that bystanders take on, it has not been clear what

motivates them to take on one role over another. Gini, Albiero, Benelli, and Altoe (2008) suggest that empathy and self-efficacy are related to bystander behavior, but their study did not allow for specific contexts or the possibility that other characteristics influence bystander reactions. My findings in Chapter Five suggest that the responses of bystanders cannot be reduced to high levels of empathy or self-efficacy. Rather, just as those who are involved in an interaction need to determine an appropriate response, bystanders need to carefully consider factors such as their relationships with those involved, distance from the interaction, and the potential negative consequences of coming to somebody's defense or reporting negative behavior to an adult.

I observed a number of examples of students coming to the aid of peers and the primary motivations in these cases were standing up for somebody that they did not think would stand up for him or herself (such as when Jared, Ben, and Brad attempted to protect Monica from Kathy) and maintaining smooth-flowing interactions, such as when students intervened to tell Kevin that he was out during a game of four square. It is important to note that those who intervened in these cases had a social status that was greater than or equal to those who they were intervening against. While it is not impossible for low-status students to intervene against high-status students, students in these situations may be more likely to risk becoming targets themselves. Based on conversations with lower-status students, it appears that they were more likely to tell a teacher on somebody else's behalf than to intervene directly.

Like intervening on somebody's behalf, telling on others has potentially negative consequences. Students generally wanted to avoid being labeled tattletales, which was associated with younger students as well as with reporting relatively small rule violations.

The distance between an observer and an interaction, and the corresponding likelihood of being seen, then, likely influences a student's decision of whether or not to tell. Because physical attacks are easier to observe from a distance than verbal attacks, it is likely that the desire not to be seen as a tattler contributes to the increased reporting and punishment of physical attacks in general. Even the interrogation by adults that is likely to follow reporting another student's rule violation was perceived in some cases as a negative experience to be avoided whenever possible. A final complication in a bystander's decision about whether or not to tell or intervene is the range of interpretations regarding what "big" and "small" rules are. While Maggie in Chapter Five reported telling on others for having cell phones because she perceived this to be a "really big rule," other students reported only telling on acts of physical violence.

These findings support a shift in focus from labels like bullying to specific behaviors as discussed above. If schools make major rule violations clear to students, they may be more likely to report these behaviors. Also important, however, is the elimination of disincentives for reporting rule violations. Students should be able to report violations without fear of retaliation from others or accusatory interrogations. This is complicated by the propensity of students to use the rules against each other because adults often feel the need to question students who report a behavior in order to get information as well as to determine if they are telling the truth. It is possible that these issues may only be resolved in cases where positive school cultures are created, as discussed later in this chapter.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FRIENDSHIP

While previous researchers have argued that those with close friends are bullied less frequently than those without (Boulton et al. 1999, Mouttapa et al. 2004), my findings suggest that friendship can insulate students from both negative interactions and trouble. While Monica did not ask for help dealing with Kathy in the example above, a number of students reported turning to friends for help after a negative interaction. In these situations, friends may go talk to the attacker, tell the teacher, or simply listen. As Chad notes in Chapter Five, friends can also be used to demonstrate power over an attacker by “casting out” and ignoring attackers. Like the strategy of intervention discussed above, one’s ability to do this successfully depends on having a relatively high social status. It is unlikely, for example, that popular students would be hurt by exclusion from a group of unpopular students.

The examples above conform to the idea of a “friendship protection hypothesis” (Boulton et al. 1999:465), but friendships also protected students from punishment. As discussed in Chapter Five, over half of the students who gave a reason that they would avoid telling on somebody cited friendship. As Tim stated, some students believe that “True friends do not tell on each other.” Friends can also provide alibis for those who are accused (falsely or not) of breaking the rules. While one student reported being unwilling to lie for friends who have been accused of breaking school rules, it is likely that other students do so. The importance of friendships in terms of protection from negative interactions and punishment compound the difficult situations faced by social isolates, as they may be more likely to be targets, have nowhere to turn for support when

they are attacked, and have nobody to defend them if they are accused of breaking the rules.

In addition to reiterating the important functions that friendship serves for students, these findings also suggest that schools should be careful not to magnify these effects by automatically taking the word of students who are able to present friends as witnesses over those who are not. Additionally, adults in schools need to be careful not to align themselves with any particular group of students if all students are to feel comfortable reporting rule violations to them. If a group of high-status students regularly talks and makes jokes with a teacher or recess supervisor, for example, social isolates will likely be less willing to go to that adult with a complaint. Combined with the potential negative consequences of telling, a large number of interactions that a student finds problematic could go unreported, increasing feelings of victimization.

COMPETING PERSPECTIVES

The impetus for this project was a desire to understand how students, teachers, staff members, and principals perceive negative peer interactions in elementary schools. The quotations and field notes throughout this work demonstrate that there were numerous differences in perspective within and between members of these groups. Additionally, my own perspective on these interactions emerged during my time in the field and in the analysis of my data. Examinations of interactions that are considered “normal” parts of school life highlight some of the differences between my perspective and those of my participants. As discussed in Chapter Three, many students rationalized negative behavior toward younger peers and siblings by stating that “*everyone* picks on the little kids.” Some adults also shared a view that these behaviors were a normal part of

school life and that the younger students would have a chance to pick on others when they got older.

Despite these rationalizations, fifth grade students picking on younger kids is in line with typical definitions of bullying, which note the presence of an imbalance of power. If this project were an examination of bullying as a folk concept, it is unlikely that negative behaviors toward younger students would be considered bullying. Instead, this project examines bullying in the context of school cultures that allow a number of negative interactions to be dismissed as “not bullying” because of the ways students and adults have defined bullies. As noted in Chapter Three, I am hesitant to side either with students who argued that these interactions were normal or with researchers who might argue that any abuse of an imbalance of power is bullying without a greater understanding of the interpretations of the younger students in question and the beliefs of the older students about whether negative behavior toward younger peers can ever cross a line and become bullying.

Acknowledging this hesitation, my sense is that younger students considered these interactions unwanted and unpleasant, despite their relatively mild nature. While an older student kicking a younger student’s ball away is not the same as an older student hitting a younger student in the face with a ball, if the behavior of kicking a ball away is repeated over time it may cause the younger student to stop playing with the ball in order to avoid a negative interaction. Regardless of the interpretations involved, the findings reported here suggest that the potential for bullying and other negative interactions is tied to the culture of a school in complex ways and, as such, any potentially negative interactions should be carefully examined.

POTENTIAL APPROACHES TO THE PROBLEM OF BULLYING

Because bullying is tied to the culture of a school it is unlikely to be solved with small changes such as the addition of peer mediation programs that aim to change student interactions without changing the underlying school culture. During my time at Hillside Elementary, for example, there seemed to be little carryover from three years of Project PEACE, which was focused on teaching students how to discuss and mediate their disagreements but did not change the culture that produced these disagreements in the first place. In contrast to this sort of “tacked on” approach to changing school culture, a number of researchers have advocated for school culture approaches that focus on creating positive school and classroom climates in order to create a sense of community among students and reduce conflicts like bullying (Olweus 1993, Gagnon and Leone 2001, Sullivan et al. 2004).

While the implementation of school-culture approaches such as these takes financial resources that many schools do not have, preliminary research indicates that activities such as marching band promote a similar sense of community among students in some schools (Dagaz 2009). Marching band differs from extracurricular activities such as sports in that each student is important to the success of the whole. In contrast, only five players can impact a basketball game at any one time. While status differences based on age and musical ability exist, conflicts between students are minimized by shared goals and mentoring relationships may be more likely to develop between more experienced and less experienced band members.

Research indicates that school culture approaches can successfully reduce negative peer interactions (Olweus 1993, Sullivan et al. 2004), but schools must also

ensure that students develop effective strategies for preventing and defending against these interactions outside of school and later in life. As noted in Chapter Four, students may also be less likely to learn these strategies in schools where student interactions are strictly controlled by adults. Additionally, Hillside Elementary's principal, Mrs. Knight, rightfully suggests that efforts at character education such as the Life Goals may lose effectiveness when they are emphasized too frequently. In general, it seems that students will be more likely to take rules seriously and report violations to adults if they have a hand in their creation. While students at Greenfield Elementary faced punishment for talking while waiting in line to return to their classrooms after recess it is likely that they viewed this rule as arbitrary. As a result, rules that existed to prevent injury, such as those against standing on swings or climbing up slides, may have seemed similarly arbitrary. If students had a hand in deciding upon a list of five or ten rules that should not be broken and for which students would face serious punishment, they may be more likely to avoid these behaviors and report their violation.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While this research has provided a number of important insights into the culture surrounding bullying in schools, it can be seen in many ways as a first step toward an interpretive sociology of bullying. As such there are a number of promising avenues for future research. Foremost among these is research examining these processes in a more diverse setting. Researchers such as Corsaro (1994) have found that some Italian and African American preschool children are more likely to use debates and teasing to develop friendships than their White American counterparts, which has important implications for the interpretation of interactions in elementary school. In addition to the

makeup of the student body, future researchers should explore different school structures, such as those with all elementary grade levels in a single classroom, to explore how this influences student interaction. While some of the students in this study rationalized negative behaviors toward younger students, for example, it is possible that students in such a classroom will feel like mentors to their younger counterparts and aim to protect them from harm as a result.

As noted near the end of Chapter Five, because this study focuses on students at the end of elementary school it is unlikely to represent the elementary school experience in general. Research that begins in kindergarten and follows students throughout elementary school and into middle school would be ideal for examining the processes by which students rationalize particular behaviors. Work in the interpretive tradition by Corsaro and Molinari (2005), for example, examines the transition of Italian children from preschool into and through elementary school. Longitudinal research such as this in the United States would also allow for the comparison of different teachers' discipline styles with the same group of students, providing further insight into the extent to which a consistent approach to discipline affects student behavior. This type of work would also reveal how student interpretations of their interactions change over time. It is possible, for example, that the fifth graders who rationalize negative behaviors toward younger students because they are the oldest students in their school had different opinions when they were among the youngest in the school and that these attitudes will change again when they enter middle school.

CONCLUSION

While this project cannot provide a complete understanding of all the issues related to bullying, it is a first step toward the creation of an interpretive sociology of bullying. My contributions toward this end may be best evaluated by considering how my findings would have differed if I had stopped my analyses at a particular point. For example, while the student and adult definitions of bullying in Chapters Three and Four provide much-needed context for the understanding of these interactions, a project that stopped with these analyses would have missed the effects of differing approaches to discipline at the two schools. Further, a project that stopped after examining adults' differing approaches to discipline would have missed the secondary adjustments that students used to hide their interactions from adults and use the school's rules against other students. In each case, large amounts of important information would have been missed – information that has been overlooked by approaches to bullying that focus on measuring behavior without context, categorizing students, or searching for qualities that make students more likely to be bullies or bullied. Most importantly, this research demonstrates that bullying is a school culture issue demanding an understanding of and consideration for local school cultures in order to improve students' daily experiences at school.

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APPENDIX A: STUDENT INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. When is your birthday (including year)?
2. How long have you gone to school here? Where did you go before that? What was it like compared to here?
3. What do you like about recess and other free time at school?
4. What do you like about class time?
5. Can you think of a time when you saw one student being mean to another student? What happened? When was it?
6. Why was what they were doing mean?
7. Do you know how it started? If so, how? If not, why do you think it happened?
8. Were there other people around? What did they do?
9. How did it end?
10. Where do you think students are the meanest to each other?
11. What kinds of things happen there? Do those things happen other places, too?
12. Why do you think students are meaner there?
13. How do you know if somebody is being mean to you or if they are just picking on you?
14. If a new student came to school and you wanted to help them understand what was a joke and what was serious, what would you tell them?
15. What do you think you would do if somebody was mean to you?
16. If somebody was mean to you would you tell anybody else? Who would you tell? (friends, teachers, staff)?
17. What do you think most students do if somebody is being mean to them?
18. Have you ever been mean to somebody? What happened?
19. Have you ever been picking on somebody when they thought you were being mean? What happened?

20. Have you ever gotten mad at somebody even though you knew they were only picking on you? What happened?
21. Do you and your friends ever pick on each other for fun?
22. Can you think of a time that you and your friends picked on each other for fun? What happened?
23. Do you and your friends ever hit or kick each other for fun?
24. Can you think of a specific time that happened? What happened?
25. Is there a difference between how you react when your friends pick on you and when people who aren't your friends pick on you? What is the difference? Why do you think it is?
26. Do you and your family members ever pick on each other for fun? What kinds of things do you do?
27. What are your school's rules about how students get along?
28. Do you think that they work?
29. Do students ever try to break the rules without getting caught? What do they do to not get caught?
30. Do you ever see people break the rules and not tell on them?
31. How do you decide when to tell on somebody for breaking the rules?
32. Does anybody ever claim that somebody broke the rules when they didn't? Why?
33. When you think of the word "bullying," what does that mean to you?
34. What kinds of things make somebody a bully?
35. Can somebody do those things and not be a bully? What is the difference between somebody who is a bully and somebody who isn't?
36. Do you think that there are any bullies in fifth grade here?
37. Is there anything that you think might help fifth graders get along better?
38. Is there anything else you think I should know about how fifth graders get along?

APPENDIX B: TEACHER AND STAFF MEMBER INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Career history – What is your current job? How long have you been doing what you do? What else have you done/what other grades have you taught? Have you worked anywhere else? What was it like compared to here?
2. What do you like most about your job?
3. Have you seen changes in the way students get along since you've been working in schools?
4. In terms of behavior, how typical is this class/are these fifth graders of the others years you've interacted with over the years?
5. What do you think is the most common problem that arises between students?
6. What would you say is the hierarchy of punishment here (warning, strike, suspension, etc)?
7. Walk me through your thought process and what you would do if a student came up to you and said that somebody else was calling them a name.
8. How is that process different if you actually hear the name calling yourself?
9. Walk me through your thought process and what you would do if a student came up to you and said that somebody else was pushing them.
10. How is that process different if you actually see the pushing yourself?
11. Can you think of a recent time when you had to deal with a problem between students? What happened? When was it?
12. How did you get involved?
13. Do you know how it started? If so, how? If not, why do you think it happened?
14. Were there other students around? What did they do?
15. How did it end?
16. What do you think most students do if somebody is mean to them?
17. Do you think some students can successfully handle things on their own? If so, what makes somebody able to do that?

18. Walk me through your thought process and what you would do if a student came up to you and said that somebody did something to them that you didn't think really happened.
19. Why do you think they would do that?
20. How do you identify those situations?
21. Can you think of a recent time when that happened? What made you think that the student might not have been telling the truth? How did you handle it? How is this process different when you see or hear something yourself than when you don't?
22. (if not addressed) In situations like those does it matter who the accused student and the person claiming they're a victim are?
23. How do you deal with conflicts that arise between students because of a group activity (whether playing games like four-square or basketball at recess or doing group activities in the classroom)? Do you treat them any differently than other types of conflict?
24. How do you tell if students are being mean to each other or if they are just joking around? Do you respond differently if students are joking around? (for example, would you react differently if you heard x and y saying mean things to each other or pushing each other than you would other students?)
25. Can you think of a recent situation in which students seemed to be joking around?
26. Do you think that students ever have a hard time telling the difference? (particular students?)
27. Do you see differences between boys and girls in terms of negative behaviors like name calling or pushing and reactions to negative behaviors?
28. Do you see differences based on other characteristics?
29. What do you think leads to negative behaviors like name calling or pushing?
30. What do you think makes a student able to successfully get along with other students?
31. Do you think that popularity plays a role in how the fifth graders get along? (how so?)
32. How aware do you think students are of the school's rules about how students get along?

33. Do you think that the current policy is effective? Why? Why not? How do students respond to it?
34. If you could, what changes would you make to improve it?
35. When you think of the word “bullying,” what does that mean to you?
36. What kinds of things make somebody a bully?
37. Can somebody do those things and not be a bully? What is the difference between somebody who is a bully and somebody who isn’t?
38. Do you see bullying occur? If so, how prevalent is it in the fifth grade compared to the other grades? (Probe: can you give an example?)
39. Do you see other types of conflict between students? If so, how prevalent are other types of conflict? (can you give an example?)
40. How do you decide how to arrange the desks in the classroom? (Do you think differently when putting students in longer-term groups like civil war exercises, etc.?)
41. What kinds of things do you do to try to foster an environment in which students get along with each other?
42. If you could, are there any changes you would make that you think would improve school for students in general?
43. How do you see the fifth graders doing next year when they go to middle school? Is there anybody that you’re worried about? Why? Is there anybody that you think will do particularly well? Why?
44. Do you talk with other teachers and the principal about discipline standards or does everybody have their own approach? How are punishments determined? (do you try to be consistent with other teachers?)
45. Is there anything that you think I might have missed?

APPENDIX C: PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Career history – What is your current job? How long have you been doing what you do? What else have you done/what other grades have you taught? Have you worked anywhere else? What was it like compared to here?
2. What do you like most about your job?
3. Have you seen changes in the way students get along since you've been working in schools?
4. In terms of behavior, how typical is this class/are these fifth graders of the others you've interacted with over the years?
5. What do you think is the most common problem that arises between students?
6. What would you say is the hierarchy of punishment here (warning, strike, suspension, etc)?
7. How often do students tell you things themselves vs. you hearing about things from teachers, etc.?
8. How much of the discipline do you think is handled by you vs. the teachers?
9. Walk me through your thought process and what you would do if a teacher or staff member told you that a student was calling another student a name.
10. How is that process different if a student comes to you him/herself?
11. How is that process different if you actually hear the name calling yourself?
12. How would that process be affected if the student was doing something physically abusive to the other student? (effects based on teacher reporting, student reporting, observation)
13. Can you think of a recent time when you had to deal with a problem between students? What happened? When was it?
14. How did you get involved?
15. Do you know how it started? If so, how? If not, why do you think it happened?
16. Were there other students around? What did they do?
17. How did it end?

18. What do you think most students do if somebody is mean to them?
19. Do you think some students can successfully handle things on their own? If so, what makes somebody able to do that?
20. Walk me through your thought process about how you determine who is telling the truth when dealing with conflicts between students.
21. Why do you think students might say things happened that didn't?
22. Can you think of a recent time when that happened? What made you think that the student might not have been telling the truth? How did you handle it? How is this process different when you see or hear something yourself than when you don't?
23. (if not addressed) In situations like those does it matter who the accused student and the person claiming they're a victim are?
24. How do you tell if students are being mean to each other or if they are just joking around? Do you respond differently if students are joking around? (for example, would you react differently if you heard x and y saying mean things to each other or pushing each other than you would other students?)
25. Can you think of a recent situation in which students seemed to be joking around?
26. Do you think that students ever have a hard time telling the difference? (particular students?)
27. Do you see differences between boys and girls in terms of negative behaviors like name calling or pushing and reactions to negative behaviors?
28. Do you see differences based on other characteristics?
29. What do you think leads to negative behaviors like name calling or pushing?
30. What do you think makes a student able to successfully get along with other students?
31. Do you think that popularity plays a role in how the fifth graders get along? (how so?)
32. How aware do you think students are of the school's rules about how students get along?
33. Do you think that the current policy is effective? Why? Why not? How do students respond to it?

34. Is there anything that you think would improve it?
35. When you think of the word “bullying,” what does that mean to you?
36. What kinds of things make somebody a bully?
37. Can somebody do those things and not be a bully? What is the difference between somebody who is a bully and somebody who isn’t?
38. Do you see bullying occur? If so, how prevalent is it in the fifth grade compared to the other grades? (Probe: can you give an example?)
39. Some of the students have mentioned that being mean isn’t bullying if there are differences in age or if people are siblings. Do you think those kinds of things make a difference in whether or not something is bullying?
40. Do you see other types of conflict between students? If so, how prevalent are other types of conflict? (can you give an example?)
41. What kinds of things do you do to try to foster an environment in which students get along with each other?
42. How are class assignments made?
43. How would you describe your school’s anti-bullying efforts? How has this changed (Life goals - C.L.A.S.S., peer mediation vs. none, etc.).
44. If you could, are there any changes you would make that you think would improve school for students in general?
45. How do you see the fifth graders doing next year when they go to middle school? Is there anybody that you’re worried about? Why? Is there anybody that you think will do particularly well? Why?
46. Do you talk with teachers about discipline standards or does everybody have their own approach? How are punishments determined? (do you try to be consistent with other teachers?)
47. Is there anything that you think I might have missed?

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EMPLOYMENT

2009-Present Assistant Professor, Albright College Department of Sociology and Anthropology

EDUCATION

- 2009 **Doctor of Philosophy, Sociology**
Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana
Minor: Education Policy Studies
Qualifying Examination: Childhood and Adolescence
Dissertation: "Interpretations of Bullying: How Students, Teachers, and Principals Perceive Negative Peer Interactions in Elementary Schools."
Dissertation Committee: Donna Eder (Chair), William A. Corsaro, Tim Hallett, and Bradley A. U. Levinson
- 2005 **Master of Arts, Sociology**
Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana
Thesis: Ambiguous Ends: The Use of Sarcasm in School Administrator Meetings
Committee: Tim Hallett (Chair) and William A. Corsaro
- 2002 **Bachelor of Science, Sociology and English**
Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, Michigan
Graduated Honors and Magna Cum Laude
Honors Thesis: "The Education of Native American Students: A Historical Overview and Examination of Identity Transformation at an Alternative High School"

TEACHING AND RESEARCH INTERESTS

Social Psychology
Childhood and Adolescence
Sociology of Education
Sociology of the Family

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
Research Methods (Qualitative, Quantitative, and Community-Based)
Media

HONORS AND AWARDS

- 2009 Grant-in-Aid of Doctoral Research, Indiana University Graduate School: \$1,000.
- 2008-09 Glen D. and Dorothy E. Stewart Family Scholarship, Indiana University Department of Sociology; in recognition of excellence in both teaching and research: \$15,000.
- 2008 SAGE/Pine Forge Teaching Innovations and Professional Development Award, Teaching and Learning Division, American Sociological Association: \$500.
- 2007 Edwin H. Sutherland Award for Excellence in and Commitment to Teaching, Indiana University Department of Sociology: \$500.
- 2007-08 Discipline-Based Scholarship in Education Graduate Student Associate, Indiana University Center for Education and Society; interdisciplinary pre-doctoral training program promoting innovative educational policy research: \$2,000.
- 2007 Course Development Fund, Indiana University Liberal Arts and Management Program: \$1,000.
- 2007 Travel Award, Indiana University College of Arts and Sciences: \$300.
- 2003-05 Summer Research Fellowship, Indiana University Department of Sociology: \$2,000.
- 2002-09 Tuition Scholarship, Indiana University Department of Sociology.
- 2002 Edward E. McKenna Award for Achievement in Sociological Research Methods, Central Michigan University Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work: \$750.

TEACHER TRAINING

- 2008 **Pre-Conference Workshop for New Teachers of Sociology**, ASA Section on Teaching and Learning.
- 2006-07 **DePauw Faculty Fellow**, Preparing Future Faculty Partnership between DePauw University and Indiana University.
- 2004-06 **Preparing Future Faculty Sequence in Higher Education and Pedagogy**, Indiana University Department of Sociology

2006 **Preparing Future Faculty Certification**, North Central Sociological Association.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

2007-08 **Instructor**, Liberal Arts and Management Program, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. Responsible for all aspects, including design, preparation, instruction, and evaluation, of the following course:

Analytical Problem Solving (2 semesters): An honors-level junior seminar with 18-21 students in which students learn to design surveys and apply statistical concepts through a community-based project for a local nonprofit organization.

2003-08 **Instructor**, Department of Sociology, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.
Responsible for all aspects, including design, preparation, instruction, and evaluation, of the following courses:

Introduction to Sociology (four semesters): An introductory course with 24 students in the summer (one semester) and 60-70 students in the fall and spring (three semesters).

Society and the Individual (five semesters): An introduction to sociological social psychology with 12-16 students in the summer (two semesters) and 62-72 students in the fall and spring (three semesters).

Sociological Research Methods (one semester): An intensive summer research methods course with six students.

2006-07 **Adjunct Instructor**, Department of Sociology, Indiana University-Purdue University Columbus, Columbus, Indiana. Responsible for all aspects, including design, preparation, instruction, and evaluation, of the following courses:

Introduction to Sociology (1 semester): An introductory course with 14 students.

Sociology of Childhood and Adolescence (1 semester): A senior-level course with 11 students.

2002-04 **Graduate Teaching Assistant**, Department of Sociology, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. Responsibilities included advising students and grading papers and exams.

Introduction to Sociology (2 semesters): Professor Tim Hallett

Media and Society (1 semester): Professor Chris VonDerHarr

Work and Occupations (1 semester): Professor Jack Martin

PUBLICATIONS

- Forthcoming Hallett, Tim, Brent Harger, and Donna Eder. "Gossip at Work: Unsanctioned Evaluative Talk in Formal School Meetings." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*.
- 2008 Harger, Brent, and Tim Hallett. "Using *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* to Teach Introductory Sociology." In *Teaching the Novel across the Curriculum: A Handbook for Educators*. Colin C. Irvine (Ed.). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- 2003 Kinney, David A., Katherine Brown Rosier, and Brent Harger. "The Educational Institution." In *Handbook of Symbolic Interactionism*. Larry T. Reynolds and Nancy J. Herman-Kinney (Eds.). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

BOOK REVIEWS

- 2008 Harger, Brent. Review of *Children and Society: The Sociology of Children and Childhood Socialization* by Gerald Handel, Spencer E. Cahill, and Frederick Elkin. *Teaching Sociology* 36: 182-183.

PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATIONS

- 2009 Harger, Brent. "To Be a Bully: Student Definitions and Interpretations of Potentially Negative Peer Interactions." Paper to be presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, San Francisco, CA.
- 2008 Harger, Brent, and Bradley A. Koch. "A Head Start at Meeting Expectations: Parental Attitudes and Needs by Level of Education in a College Town." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Boston, MA.
- 2008 Hallett, Tim, Brent Harger, and Donna Eder. "Gossip at Work: Unsanctioned Evaluative Talk in Formal School Meetings." Paper presented at the Couch-Stone Symbolic Interactionist Symposium, Urbana-Champaign, IL. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2005 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Philadelphia, PA.
- 2007 Harger, Brent, and Tim Hallett. "Making Race Real: Using *The*

Autobiography of Malcolm X to Teach Introductory Sociology.” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, New York, NY.

- 2007 Harger, Brent, and Mari Dagaz (equal authorship). “Race, Gender, and Research: Images of Professors in Popular Film, 1985-2005.” Paper presented at the Teachers, Teaching, and the Movies conference, Charleston, SC. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2007 joint annual meeting of the Midwest Sociological Society and the North Central Sociological Association, Chicago, IL.
- 2006 Harger, Brent, and Tim Hallett. “Ambiguous Ends: The Use of Sarcasm by Adults in School Staff Meetings.” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Montreal, Quebec.
- 2002 Kinney, David A., and Brent Harger. “Native American Educational Success and Culture: An Applied Research Project and Pilot Mentoring Program.” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Chicago, IL.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

- 2007-08 Principal Investigator, *Head Start is Not Just for Kids: An Analysis of Parent/Guardian Demographics, Needs, and Attitudes about Kindergarten Readiness*. Designed and administered a survey of local Head Start parents in partnership with the local Head Start organization. This survey was analyzed by students in my L316 course, who then presented their findings to Head Start in a written report and formal presentation.
- 2005-07 Co-Investigator with Mari Dagaz, *Images of Professors in Film: Portrayals of Substance and Style*. Content analysis of 51 popular films featuring professors between 1985 and 2005. Designed coding sheet and coded, entered, and analyzed data.
- 2003-05 Co-Investigator with Tim Hallett, *Strategies of Adult Gossip in School Staff Meetings*. Transcribed videotaped teacher and administrator meetings and coded and analyzed data.
- 2001 Co-Investigator with David A. Kinney, *Native American Educational Success and Culture: An Applied Research Project and Pilot Mentoring Program*. Transcribed interviews about mentoring with Native American college students, coded and analyzed data.

SERVICE

Indiana University Department of Sociology

- 2006-09 Treasurer, Graduate Student Association, Department of Sociology,
Indiana University
- 2007-08 Faculty Mentoring Award Committee, Department of Sociology, Indiana
University
- 2005-06 Undergraduate Affairs Committee, Department of Sociology, Indiana
University
- 2002-09 Member, Graduate Student Association, Department of Sociology, Indiana
University

Indiana University

- 2004 Chair, Fee Committee, Graduate Employee Organization, Indiana
University
- 2003-09 Graduate Employee Organization, Indiana University
- 2002-09 Graduate and Professional Student Organization, Indiana University

American Sociological Association

- 2008 Presider, Refereed Roundtable Session on the Sociology of Education,
Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Boston, MA.

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

American Sociological Association

Section Memberships: Children and Youth, Methodology, Social Psychology,
Sociology of Education, Teaching and Learning

Eastern Sociological Society

Midwest Sociological Society

North Central Sociological Association

REFERENCES

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